

Congregationalism – Heritage & Future

Class #1 – Church History to the Protestant Reformation

September 16, 2020

Purpose of the Study

- 1) Celebrate the 400th Anniversary of the Founding of Plymouth Colony in 1620 AD.
 - a) The “spiritual birthday” of the United States.
 - b) As oppose to the New York Times “1619 Project.”
- 2) To define what the word “Congregationalism”.
 - a) Small “c” congregationalism (the democratic form of church government exists).
 - b) But what about big “C” Congregationalism as a church tradition?
- 3) To ponder if (biblical) Congregationalism is dead.
- 4) To ponder the future direction of this church.
 - a) Is our Statement of Faith enough to define us?
 - b) What Christian tradition defines us?
 - c) Should we join a denomination? If so which one?
 - d) Where do we go to find a new pastor?
- 5) To ponder the relationship between Congregationalism and Presbyterianism (Congregationalism nearest relative).
- 6) On a personal level Pastor Doug is pondering these things as it relates to his clergy affiliation.
 - a) He is a die-hard old-school Congregationalist.
 - b) But he is thinking more and more Congregationalism as a denomination is dead.

Nicene Christianity

- 1) Nicene, or early, Christianity is held by all Christians: Protestants, Roman Catholics & the Eastern Orthodox.
- 2) It is found in the great ancient creeds:
 - a) **Apostles Creed** (125-650 AD)
 - b) **Nicene Creed** (325 AD, revised in 381 AD)
 - c) **Athanasian Creed** (c. 500 AD)
- 3) There two big issues that the early church debate which define Nicene Christianity
 - a) **The Trinity** – there is only one God in three persons (1 what, 3 who’s).
 - i) The Father, the Son & the Spirit are all fully and equally God.
 - ii) The Father, Son & Spirit are all different.
 - iii) There is only one God.
 - b) **The Hypostatic Union**
 - i) Jesus if fully God.
 - ii) And Jesus is fully man.

The Protestant Reformation

- 1) The division in the West during the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century wasn't about the core doctrines hammered out in the early church.
- 2) It was about: Authority, salvation and the church.
- 3) The distinct Protestant doctrines were later labeled around five "*solas*" (the Latin for alone).

Core Protestant Beliefs from the Reformation

- 1) *sola Scriptura* ("Scripture alone")
 - a) "*All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;*" – 2Timothy 3:16.
 - b) The final authority, in church & in life, is Scripture alone.
 - i) All of Scripture is true and authoritative (*tota scriptura*), not just certain parts or themes.
 - ii) The key to understanding the Bible is that Scripture interprets Scripture. (*scriptura scripturam interpretatur*)
 - The numerous & the clear parts interpret the few and the obscure.
 - Scripture must be read in context, passages that clearly teach on a particular subject are to be favored over texts that only make a passing reference to the subject in a secondary way.
 - The New Testament interprets the Old Testament.
 - iii) The literal (or plain) reading of the text is superior to the allegorical or mystical.
 - iv) The historical-grammatical method for reading the Bible is preferred. This is the attempt to discover the biblical author's original intended meaning by examining the grammar, syntax, historical background, literary genre and theological/canonical background of each passage.
 - c) Because of *sola Scriptura* the reformers rejected several medieval traditions:
 - i) The supremacy (and even the existence) of the Papacy.
 - ii) Tradition is equal to, or superior to, the Bible.
 - iii) Rejection of the Apocrypha as being canonical.
 - iv) 5 out of the 7 medieval sacraments. (Only Baptism & Communion remain.)
 - v) Rejection of the doctrine of purgatory.
 - d) *sola Scriptura* is NOT:
 - i) All individual interpretations are equally valid.
 - ii) The church has no authority.
 - iii) Tradition is not useful.
 - iv) The above are examples of "*nuda Scriptura*" (naked Scripture), which might be the official tradition of modern pop evangelicalism, but it isn't from the Protestant Reformation (or the Bible).

2) ***sola gratia*** (“grace alone”)

- a) *“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”* – Eph 2:8-9
- b) All of salvation is by grace (God’s unmerited) favor alone.
- c) Roman Catholics teach grace is necessary but not sufficient. In other words grace is needed for salvation, but must be coupled with human works & will. So salvation is “synergistic” a combination of God’s grace and human action.
- d) The Reformers (not just Calvinists!) argued that grace is not only necessary but sufficient. That all of salvation (from election to glorification) is done only by grace, thus it is “monergistic”. Even such things as believing and doing good works is by God’s grace alone.

3) ***sola fide*** (“Faith Alone”)

- a) *“But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness,”* – Romans 4:5
- b) One is declare right (i.e. justified) by God crediting (i.e. imputing) Christ’s righteousness to us. We receive this by faith alone in Christ’s work on the cross.
- c) Roman Catholic theology teaches faith is needed, but so are works for justification.
 - i) Christ’s righteousness is infused into the believer so they can do good works and merit salvation.
 - ii) Justification and sanctification are combined as a life long process that at any time can be lost.
- d) The Reformers argued that faith alone is required for justification.
 - i) Christ’s righteousness is credited (imputed) to the believer, so that one is completely and perfectly saved.
 - ii) Justification is instantaneous and then is followed by sanctification (a life of holiness). However, no human works (baptism, obedience, etc.) are ever part of one’s justification.
 - iii) Thus Christians are at the same time justified and a sinner.
(simul justus et peccator)

4) ***solus Christus*** (“Christ alone”)

- a) *“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.’”* – John 14:6
- b) Christ is the only mediator between God and man and the only source of salvation.
- c) All other mediators are rejected (Virgin Mary, saints, priests, etc.)
- d) In particular the medieval sacrament of penance is rejected. (Though not the church!)

5) ***solī deo Gloria*** (“Glory to God alone”)

- a) *“Everyone who is called by My name, and whom I have created for My glory, whom I have formed, even whom I have made.”* – Isaiah 43:7
- b) Everything that is done should be for God’s glory to the exclusion of human pride.

- c) Christians are motivated to seek God's glory and not their own, because salvation is completely a work of God. (*sola fide, sola gratia, solus Christus*)
- d) No one, including medieval saints, Popes or priests are worthy of God's glory.
- e) Thus the medieval idea of merit and indulgences are rejected.

6) **Priesthood of All Believers**

- a) *"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;"* – 1Peter 2:9
- b) The complete structure of the medieval priesthood is rejected by the Reformers. (No priests, monks, or popes)
- c) The only mediator between God and man is Christ, not priests.
- d) This means more responsibility for the laity and thus the Bible has to be studied by everyone in the common language.
- e) This is not a rejection of having leaders in the church (such as elders, pastors, deacons)!

7) **Sanctity of All Callings**

- a) All jobs (as long as they are not sinful) are of equal importance to God.
 - i) So church leaders are not closer to God because of their office.
 - ii) Clergy thus can marry.
- b) Christians are called into all occupations and should be "salt & light" in all aspects of society.
- c) So money, in itself, is not evil, just a created thing.
- d) From this will come the "Protestant work ethic" and modern capitalism.

History of Christianity

