

## THE GREAT DIVIDE

In the mid eighties, I took my family on a vacation to Yellowstone National Park. My parents were already there as they had pulled their travel trailer into the park and waited for our arrival. The park was breath-taking; the beautiful sky, the fresh mountain air, no humidity, the streams and lakes, the eruption of Ole Faithful, the drive to Jackson Hole passed the Grand Tetons, etc.-- it was just great! We fished, drove the park late in the evenings to see the wild life come out. This was where our youngest daughter Darcy learned to drive. It was just one of those special occasions in our life!

On one of those excursions, we came to a place in the road that had a sign that read: The Continental Divide—all water falling east ends up in the Atlantic and all water falling off to the west ends up in the Pacific Ocean. What a sight—we stood over it straddling the Continental Divide.

Today in the world of the Christian belief, we have a great divide; a divide that we too straddle. One side says that man is in need of help; help to assist him to be a better person. Help to aid him in being the total person that he should be. This watered-down version of the teaching of scriptures discounts totally man's sinfulness and places a sense of worth in becoming a better person. This is captured in the remarks of the pastor of the Crystal Cathedral, Robert Schuller:

*"I do not think anything has been done in the name of Christ and under the banner of Christianity that has proven more destructive to human personality, and hence counterproductive to the evangelistic enterprise, than the unchristian, uncouth strategy of attempting to make people aware of their lost and sinful condition. Classical reformed theology has erred in its insistence that theology be God-centered, not man-centered."*<sup>1</sup>

As a result of this man-centered template being placed over scripture we have—as William Booth predicted:

*"Religion without the Holy Ghost, Christianity without Christ, forgiveness without repentance, salvation without regeneration, politics without God and heaven with hell."*<sup>2</sup>

While the other side of this great divide, says we need a Savior because we have sinned against a holy God and we need forgiveness. Our conscience is screaming that I have done wrong; I've not trusted the Creator of heaven and earth and I've disobeyed every word every

command He has made. But worst than that, I've ignored Him and not given Him the worship due Him! And if we fall on the wrong side of this divide, the end will be disastrous.

We have been studying the last six weeks, the Sola's of the Reformation. These Latin phrases capture the essence of a renewed Christianity. The gospel had been buried in man-made affirmations of a religion that had gone cold. A personal and meaningful relationship with the Living God that was to be found in Christ was all but gone. Order replaced life and loyalty replaced relationship while dogma replaced God. Renewal would not work, there was nothing to renew; revival would not work there was nothing to revive; only a reformation—a return to the gospels—that was what was needed.

The Reformation had come to Europe. It had moved out of Germany and into France under the leadership of John Calvin. He was born and educated in Paris; educated to become a priest. His sudden conversion and the death of his father allowed him to move to Basel, Switzerland in 1534. He would begin writing the Institutes of the Christian Religion. Later he would move to Geneva, Switzerland and headquartered there. In Switzerland, Calvin would preach and pastor the people for many years. Others followed the move of God to bring about an epic change in Christianity. Zwingli, John Knox of Scotland, and others pressed the claims of Christ and the apostle Paul in Europe and Great Britain. They were preaching the true foundation of the Christian faith: the scriptures alone, by grace alone, by faith alone that was found in Christ alone. Not Christ plus something else but Christ alone. All of this led to all the glory going to Christ and Him alone.

They did not get it all right! No one ever does. But they started the church on the road to recovering the gospel and it is our responsibility to keep the foundations from getting covered over again.

The Roman Catholic Church was not setting still in their reaction to all that was going on. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were the most active in missionary work for the RCC. They expanded into central and south America, Canada, and the Orient. They established the Jesuits and issued the Roman Index of Prohibited Books (1559) which included all works that the Protestants had written—including was the Bible translated from the Greek into the native languages. Additionally the Inquisition, both Roman and the Spanish Inquisition were renewed

from their early fourteen century version. The church forced people to recant of ways contrary to the Roman Catholic belief or else. This started in 1559 and did not end until 1966.<sup>3</sup>

December 13, 1545, the Council of Trent convened. Their goal was to reform the clerical abuses of the church, consider the doctrine of the church, and plan for crusades against the infidels. The church confirmed the authority of the Vulgate that had been written by Jerome and the authority of the Apocrypha as final authority to the faithful. It established that justifying faith came because of faith and works. The council reaffirmed the seven sacraments. Transubstantiation was reaffirmed and purgatory was upheld, etc.

Protestants were launching missions as well. Persecution came like the early days of the church and like those days, believers were driven out of their homes and cities and as they went they preached Christ.

The Church of England had become nothing more than *Catholic-lite* so a reform movement began to return England to Protestant belief. As one historian put it, "*Under Henry nothing changed doctrinally. England simply rejected the authority of Rome.*"<sup>4</sup> Henry the eighth considered himself the "Defender of the Faith." Prince Charles today considers himself the "Defender of the Faiths." Moreover, today England like most of Europe has fallen; not to Roman Catholicism but Islam.

The Puritans wanted to 'purify' the Church of England. But they were dis-enfrangized from England and came to America by way of Holland. They were removed from their churches and many came to America.

It would not take long for some to become disenchanted with the Reformation and begin to interject false teaching. Jacob Arminius (1560-1690) at one time a convinced Calvinist was educated at the University of Leyden (he taught theology there) and at Geneva, eventually departed from the teachings of Calvin on several points of doctrine. Two of those issues centered on predestination and at what point did God determine that Christ would be slain for sin—superlapsterianism or lapseterianism.

Although the movement associated with Arminius came to be synonymous with "anti-Calvinism," it was actually a reaction against an orthodox expression of Calvinism that was placing particular emphasis on predestination and a cluster of doctrines associated with it. The

positions stated in the Remonstrance were essentially those that had been held by Arminius. In Arminius's view:

1. **God saved those who believes and perseveres.** Mankind was not so sinful that he could not under the proper persuasion be converted. In other words, man is not radically fallen to the extent that he cannot see the opportunity to turn to God's offer of salvation. Salvation to Arminius was God helping mankind out of their dilemma. God's decrees, according to Arminius, is based on his foreknowledge of the future faith of the elect and not foreordained. Foreordained meant that God alone was sovereign in the despising of saving grace. Since faith is something we must exercise to be converted, Arminius believed that faith must be available to everyone without discrimination.

Arminius did not want to commit to the Pelagian heresy of total free will but he wanted to modify it. If you remember in our Sunday evenings—Summer Lecture Series—I talked about the Council of Orange (A.D.529) condemned Pelagius but did not stand fully behind Augustine's sovereign grace. This opened the door for semi-pelagian and teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, a great many of evangelical churches today are semi-Pelagian.

2. **Man's choice of God is conditional.** It is conditional upon whether man chooses to accept the invitation of God. Arminius maintained that since the human will is enslaved to sin, it is necessary for God to assist people in responding to the invitation to salvation. He does this by providing prevenient grace, so enabling the will to respond freely to God. Mankind is perceived as sick with sin not dead in sin. In his view, God also foreknows who will persevere in their Christian faith after conversion, although once again God's foreknowledge does not mean that he foreordains that they cannot fall from grace if they choose to do so.<sup>5</sup>
3. **Christ died for everyone.** Simply put according to Arminius Christ's death has made possible salvation for every person. Christ did not die for anyone particular but for everyone in general. He died to make salvation possible. When drawn out to its rational conclusion; the Arminian says that everyone must hear the gospel or else God will give them another chance to be saved after death.

4. **God's grace could be resisted.** The freedom that an individual has can over ride the will of God. In other words God never goes against someone's will. It is up to the individual to make proper use of the grace that is being afforded to him. Works enter in heavy in Arminius' view of salvation.
5. **A person can fall from grace and loss his/her salvation.** If you chose Christ you can surely undo yourself from him.

In response, forty-six pastors signed a document called the *Remonstrance* in 1610. The Dutch Reformed Church called a meeting called the Synod of Dort in 1618 to counter the rise of Arminianism. Methodists have imbibed this teaching (Wesley) along with the core of the preaching in the Second Great Awakening, Pentecostalism and the New Evangelicism here in America. Wesley may have saved England from the French Revolution but he left a legacy of piety without theology.

What came out of this Synod became known as Calvinism. It is the subject that I will undertake in the weeks ahead.

***Why is this subject so important?*** When I was in high school I ran the mile relay. Every four hundred and forty yards the baton was handed off in a designated area. Timing and precision was crucial. And if you dropped the baton, you were out of the race. It is imperative that we not miss the opportunity that is on us to pass the baton to the next generation but we first have to have a clean grasp of it ourselves. Well as I have tried to say, we stand at water shed.

But more importantly this has to do with the glory of God! Salvation is of the Lord! This 'new gospel' fails to produce deep reverence, deep repentance, deep humility, a spirit of worship, a concern for the church. The reason is it fails to make God the center of our thoughts and actions. There is a lack of the fear of God in the hearts of most church-goers. The old gospel centered on worship whereas the new centers on making us feel good about ourselves. The old gospel taught us God's ways but the new teaches us the help that God gives us.

With the new message comes new content. People don't want to pray—for what reason? We do not need God! We do not want to repent—why, we do not need to. In addition, for those of us who say we are 'reformed' beware. Pride is just around the corner for those who feel like they have it all. Reform belief is very popular today; let us not be prideful with what God has

shown us rather let us take the message of the gospel as we understand it and proclaim with humility. Paul said,

*1 Cor 2:1-5 “And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.”*

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Hard Questions for Robert Schuller about Sin and Self-Esteem, *Christianity Today*, 10 August 1984, 14-20.

<sup>2</sup> Willet A. Young, Jr., Ph.D. quoted in *Moving the Ancient Boundaries*, 66.

<sup>3</sup> Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 345.

<sup>4</sup> Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 264.

<sup>5</sup> Dictionary of Christianity in America, edited by Daniel G. Reid, Robert D. Linder, Bruce L. Shelley and Harry S. Stout. © 1990 by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA; published by InterVarsity Press. All rights reserved.)