

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Why do we exist?"
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October 26, 2008
Reformation Sunday

Every once in a while, it is good to stand back and consider your life. We do that somewhat with a baptism, thinking only the best for these little ones that Jesus encourages us to embrace. We wonder what life will be like in 2029 when Julia is 21 years old. What choices will she have made in regard to her faith and relationships? We pray God's richest blessing on her and her family.

At the same time, we ask the deeper question, "Why do we exist?" Pursuing this question causes us to explore the depths of our philosophical and theological resources. Our individual lives were not chosen by us, but by our parents by the grace of God. Everyone's life is a gift, whether they acknowledge as such or not. Spiritual life similarly is a gift, and that is why we unabashedly offer infant baptism to show forth the love of God for us well before we can even speak or tell God what we think, based on the covenant love of God and the faith of the parents. Of course, Julia and all the rest of us are charged with answering God's love with the voluntary offering of our own lives, hopes, dreams and ambitions.

Why do we exist in this time and space? Why weren't we born somewhere else or in a different century? God alone knows these things. Why have we survived so many possible threats to our lives, throughout our lives? Again, God only knows these things. Why do some of us go through incredible suffering and pain, tremendous obstacles to faith and belief, while others of us have relatively little suffering and seem so much more open to the things of God? Again, God knows. I certainly don't.

Why do some of us seem to have such long lives and others seem to only receive very little time on this earth? Why are some of us still here who don't want to be here and some of us who do want to be here are not? These are difficult questions that I have wrestled with without much answer. Ecclesiastes quotes the Preacher (Qoheleth), who most likely was King Solomon, who also did not receive the answer, except that what time we do have is a gift from God, and the earlier in life you figure that out, and receive it, the better.

What we do know is that we are born into this life in relationship, to our parents, to our siblings, to our caregivers, teachers, ministers, counselors, professors, spouses, and so on. And the key relationship continues to be the relationship with God.

The Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession of Faith answers that question faithfully and biblically: Our chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy him forever. That answer was given about 360 years ago, affirmed on July 28, 1648 in Edinburgh. The question, in Jeopardy style, was "What is the chief end of man (humanity)?"

We exist for relationship. Relationship to God and relationship to one another are the answers to what Jesus is asked are the greatest commandments: Love God and love one another. I suggested last week that nurturing this first relationship, the one with God, is measured in great part through our prayer life and our devotion to and understanding of the Scriptures, and in light of these, our outreach.

This week I wanted to look a little bit at our community's heritage, since it is Reformation Sunday. You know something of the key figures in the Reformation. Please allow me to remind you of some of the details of their lives. Martin Luther was born in 1483 in Eisleben, Germany and John Calvin was born in 1509 in Noyon, sixty miles NE of Paris in France. I remember in 1983 there were some celebrations of Martin Luther across the planet. Meanwhile, next year is one where the 500th Anniversary of Calvin's birth should have some celebration. Lynn and I have tickets to go to Switzerland in May of next year, partly with this in mind.

While Luther became a priest at the age of 25 and then did more academic work achieving his doctorate, Calvin was told by his father to read law, and was influenced by Protestant individuals fairly early in life. Luther tried strenuously to reform the church from within its ancient structure. Calvin was already running from country to country, from France to Switzerland to Italy, giving lectures and writing books from a Protestant point of view. Luther had succinctly expressed that point of view as *Sola Gratia, Sola Fidei, Sola Scriptura*: Grace alone, Faith alone, Scripture alone. He fought the notion of selling salvation through indulgences, and urged people to read and understand the Bible (particularly Paul's theology of the cross), to understand salvation as relationship (faith or trust), and to know that this is by God's grace alone, and not because we are so good. The culmination of

Luther's concerns or criticisms of the church came with his posting the 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg church on October 31, 1517, 491 years ago. Here's something to celebrate on that October 31 date so many centuries later... Luther championed the priesthood of all believers, and translated the Bible into everyday language of his region, German. Until then it was only in Latin.

Calvin picked up many of Luther's ideas and expanded upon them. The Protestant church was developing across Europe. On his way between Italy and France he met up with another reformer, Guillaume Farel. He persuaded Calvin to stay in Switzerland, specifically in Geneva. Through several stays in that city, the city was transformed from a renowned Europe wide reputation for immorality to a holy city transformed by God, making it a power in the world of the 16th century. Not only did Calvin develop much of what we call Presbyterian church government, he also developed a universal system of education for children, as well as care for the poor and the aged, things not addressed in his age. He wrote 48 commentaries on as many books of the Old and New Testaments as well as his *Institutes of Christian Religion*, which when it was originally published was only seven chapters, but after 23 years of work, it arrived at its final length of 79 chapters. It quickly became the systematic theological work of the Reformation.

Many of these ideas were spread to Scotland through John Knox and then to North America through Presbyterians and Reformed Christians of many stripes. Even the Congregation Church which is the ancestor of our current congregation was marked by a decidedly theologically reformed John Jones, founding pastor of what was then called the Dissenting Church, i.e. not Anglican in an English colony. Early in the 20th century, we became a part of the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Thus our existence as a Presbyterian Church can be traced.

But just as Moses was eulogized in Deuteronomy 34, so we are encouraged to look again at our own lives and beliefs. What was the summit of praising Moses? Was it the signs and wonders he performed? That was certainly part of it. But even more than this he was praised for his "face to face" relationship with God. It wasn't his building projects (i.e. the tabernacle). It wasn't his balanced budgets. It wasn't his guiding the people out of Egypt. It wasn't his ushering the people into the promised land, because Joshua did

this. It was that life of prayer and devotion to the One who called him in that lonely place in the desert, when he faced the bush that was burning, but not burnt out. He faced his past. He faced his own inabilities (or certainly his perceived inabilities). And God used him as a mighty leader.

And God can use you as well, as we say "I trust you, God." Have your way in my life. And so we come full circle to that central, life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ. I have no idea how much either Luther or Calvin knew of how influential they were going to be. I just read that more academic work has been done on Martin Luther than any other person in history, with exception of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And although Calvin has become known as the epitome of rigor and cheerlessness, his letters do show the rich humanity of the individual, and his passion for God, and God's ways in human culture. Certainly his ideas on politics, aesthetics, science and history have been hugely interwoven into Western thought, culture and civilization. His belief that God's covenant transforms all of life came true, to some serious degree, in his own time.

In this age, in this city, we need again to sound the alarm of our deep need for God and reform in God's ways. It is up to every generation to reform the church and the society by God's word and God's ways. This summarizes the reason we celebrate Reformation Sunday, the Sunday before October 31. We trust you will celebrate this holiday today and know and enjoy God this week.

Let us pray.