

Sola Deo Gloria: God Alone
From the series: New Wine For Century 21

Text: Isaiah 45:22; Romans 11:36

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Transcribed from a tape recording of the spoken message.

This is an exciting time for us as we re-imagine the Church; we have an opportunity to think again about the Church of Jesus Christ and what it means to be the body of Christ. Actually, we aren't the first to have that opportunity. In fact, we stem from a movement that was a total rethinking and reshaping of the Church of Christ, for, in the 16th century, the Church became reformed according to the Word of God in its Protestant manifestation and, although that had all of the tragedy of human cussedness, division and brokenness, nonetheless, the 16th century was a time in which the Church was re-imagined and it was reformed and there was a new vitality and life that flowed into the body of Christ. So, in this month of October, this month of Reformation, I thought it would be well for us, on the threshold of new beginnings as we search for that new wine for new wineskins, to revisit some of those great old themes that came to expression in that re-imagining of the Church in the 16th century.

The theme of the morning is *Sola Deo Gloria*: To God Alone Be Glory. The glory of God was the very center of that movement of reformation, and the churches that flowed out of that rupture in the Church. The glory of God - all of life lived before the face of God and the totality of life lived for the glory of God. In the expression of the Westminster Confession which came a century later, after the Reformation itself, the first question and answer which some of you Presbyterians learned was, "What is the chief end of the human person?" The answer: "To glorify God and enjoy God forever." And so, that was very much a central theme that came out of that renewal of the Church. As we seek to find a fresh expression of that theme, we want to try to understand what it was that brought that renewal movement in the Church to that central focus on the glory of God. *Sola Deo Gloria*.

The Protestant Church in its reformed expression has been particularly characterized by that theme, and that theme is perhaps identified not only with the reformed branch of the Protestant movement, but especially with John Calvin, the founding figure of the Reformed expression of the faith. When I say John Calvin, I suppose there are all kinds of images that are conjured up in your

mind because, although he is one of the truly great figures of the human story, I think no one has had a worse press than John Calvin. Perhaps this morning, as we revisit this theme, we can try to do some justice to Calvin, try to give a fair overview of this church leader, and also recognize that that which has shaped us in our past is something that we would not want to lose as we move into a future that is uncharted. The new wine and new wineskins, fresh expression - not simply a slavish imitation of that which has been said or thought or brought to expression, but nonetheless, the intention, the intention behind that central insight is as important for us as it was for them. All of life lived before the face of God, all of life issuing in the glory of God.

The word glory has been cheapened. Everything is glorious, from an outstanding fielding play in the World Series to some great touchdown catch this afternoon in the National Football League. Everything is glorious nowadays. Words get co-opted; they lose their original intention and meaning. The word glory is a word that we get from the Hebrew word, *K_bōd*, which means weighty, or heavy. The glory of God was an expression of the radiance of God, which conveyed the sense of the weightiness of God. I think we still understand that use of weight. That's a weighty thought, a weighty idea. Or, how do you weigh the suggestion that ...? Maybe we get an understanding of Calvin's sense of God's glory if we think about some of the youth language of our day when they say, "That's heavy." Well, in our Calvinist tradition, God was heavy – and heavy in the sense of weighty, in the sense of to be revered, because God, in God's godness, is beyond description, awesome. But also heavy in the sense that the shadow of God was cast over our lives, not always setting our feet to dancing, but often binding the human spirit. The heaviness of God creating, as it were, heaviness in the human person. As I look out over this congregation, I think I could call on any number of you who could tell me horror stories about how the heaviness of God marked you with a certain heaviness at some point in your Christian experience.

As I said, John Calvin is one of the great spirits of the human story and probably has as poor a press as anybody. I am not here this morning to exonerate him from all of that which has been attributed to him over the centuries, but I do want to say that John Calvin in his heart was a pastor. He never was a theologian, *per se*; he never was a systematic theologian; he was, first of all, a preacher and a pastor and he had the lives of his people in Geneva on his heart. It was his intention to bring the greatness of God to bear on the lives of that people in order that their lives might be lived seriously and responsibly, fruitfully issuing in the glory of God. That was his intention at its best.

The 16th century was a century of great unrest. It was not unlike our present historical period. Everything was in ferment. There were movements among the nations, the national groupings, ethnic groupings; there was economic ferment; there was social disruption and, obviously, there was the breaking apart of the established Church, the Roman Catholic Church. It was a time in which the foundations were being eroded. Calvin was a man, according to William Bouwsma, in his classic work, *John Calvin*, who was full of anxiety, torn between

the images of the abyss and the labyrinth. The abyss, for Calvin, meant that, as everything seemed to be shifting, there were no boundaries. The disorientation that comes into human life when there are no boundaries distressed him. He was afraid of that sense of free fall. He was a humanist scholar and that attracted him, and yet, all of that new ferment that was seething into life in the 16th century gave him great anxiety. But, on the other hand, the person alienated from God was entrapped in self-concern and that entrapment called the labyrinth, the image that Calvin used, also was something from which he wanted to steer clear, and so he found himself a person not without doubt and anxiety, seeking in his trust, his faith in God to find a standing place in the midst of that time that was full of turmoil.

As a pastor, he was seeking to bring the impress of the image of Christ on his people. He did that with great seriousness. You cannot read Calvin, you cannot be exposed to any of that history without having that overwhelming sense that God was big for Calvin, God was heavy, and Calvin was serious. Calvin was a second generation, really. He was later than Luther. Luther's experience erupted in the Reformation and the Lutheran experience of grace we'll look at next week. It was a freeing experience; it was an experience of transformation. Calvin didn't ever have his toes tingle, wanting to dance. He was, however, very concerned to understand the Word of God and to know the will of God and he wasn't so interested in personal experience. He was far more interested in calling people to obedience, to the serious and responsible execution of the will of God and to live all life to the glory of God.

I am not so sure I would have wanted to be a part of his Geneva. Krister Stendahl was here last week and, in the Perspectives hour on Sunday, he shocked me with an analogy that I never would have made myself. In fact, what he said in this Reformed Church - I would have thought the roof would have caved in, because, in talking about comparing religious faiths, he said, you know you have to compare apples to apples. For example, if you want to talk about John Calvin, you have to talk about the Ayatollah Khomeini, and I said, "Oh, my goodness, Krister! You may be a bishop, but that doesn't mean you couldn't go to hell for something like that!" But then I thought about it. Khomeini to us is a bad man, associated with all of the worst of Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism, with the coercive, forceful change of society. That's how I see him.

But, if you are a devout Muslim who believes that the world has gone to rot and that its salvation lies in the transformation of society according to the serious Islamic code, then Khomeini is a man who is simply living out publicly in the political structures that which was the deep religious devotion of his heart. Yes, I would have to say I guess that's probably just exactly what John Calvin was about. John Knox, the Scottish reformer, came to Geneva and left, saying there has never been a more perfect school of Christ than the city of Geneva under John Calvin. I mean, the impress was there. It was worked at intentionally but, lacking the exuberant experience of grace of a Luther, having a tendency or a proneness toward legality and rules and obedience. That concern became, in

much of its expression, oppressive, and that's about as honest an appraisal as I can give it while at the same time recognizing that here was a pastor who was really concerned to have the image of Christ shaped on his people and on his city, and who was concerned to have all of human life under the *aegis* of Christ, to live all of life before the face of God.

I only know Latin in a few phrases, and one of my favorites is *Coram Deo*, before the face of God. That was central to John Calvin. That carried right down through the generations - to live before the face of God, the whole of life. That means I don't take care of the Sunday obligation and then go out and carry on my business any old way I please. It means I don't do my ritual service and then carry on my personal life in any old way I please. It means that I don't have a closet, a compartment that is not accessible by the God before Whose face I live. That brings a certain seriousness into life. And God knows, most of us probably do better by living with a consciousness that we are living before the face of God, so that's to the credit of that intention. And I would suggest that any new wine that we discover and any new wineskins into which we pour it we will want to give place for a fresh expression of what it means, on the threshold of Century 21, to live before the face of God.

That being granted, we can also see that it is the God that we conceive of that will make the difference whether or not that life is one that is bathed in grace or one that is bound with legality. And that's the critical difference.

Calvin gave us much. One of the things that he gave us that has so marked our tradition is that probing to know too much. Not unlike the apostle Paul who tried to figure out God's thoughts. He forgot the word of the prophet, the Word of God that came through the prophet that said, "My ways are not your ways; my thoughts are not your thoughts. My ways are higher than your ways, my thoughts are higher than your thoughts." Paul, in the midst of his ministry following his encounter with Jesus Christ, became the Apostle to the Gentiles. The Gentile mission was flourishing, but his own people did not see what he saw; they did not see Jesus as the Messiah. So here's Paul, the Jew, bringing the grace of God to the Gentile world, trying to figure out what it is with his own brothers and sisters. That's what he's struggling with in Romans 9, 10 and 11. I think Krister Stendahl is right; that's what the whole letter is about. Paul is trying to justify his bringing the grace of God to Gentiles, not demanding that they become Jews. Paul had that transforming insight - God is embracing the nations without the nations becoming Jewish. But, what about his own brothers and sisters? They didn't see it; they were blocked against what he saw in Jesus. And so he wrestles with it, not very successfully, I think. What he said in the passage we read is that the Jews were hardened against Jesus so that there would be a door open to the Gentiles, and then when the Gentiles come in, the Jews will be jealous and come in, too.

He was trying to figure out what he, himself, knew was a mystery. He used the word mystery, but thought he understood the mystery. In fact, he was warning the Gentiles against pride over against the Jews. He said, "I tell you a mystery,

lest you become conceited." He knew it was a mystery, but isn't it human to try to "explain" the mystery, anyway? But, when he comes to the conclusion - a wonderful conclusion - all are disobedient that God may have mercy on all. That which was at the heart of Paul's experience was a God of grace who would not abandon and would not give up. So he comes to that conclusion of this broad swath of the grace of God, and then he throws up his hands and breaks out into doxology!

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?... To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 11:33ff)

That is where John Calvin's insistence on the glory of God best comes to expression, in that worship when one is lost in wonder, love and praise. As our own mission statement says, "We live together in the awe of worship in the Presence of the Mystery of God..."

John Carmody, in *How to Handle Trouble*, writes,

The basic fact that we dwell in the midst of a reality we cannot understand has been my fulcrum. If we would get to the roots of our troubles, we must come to terms with our radical ignorance. We shall never master life as if it were a mathematical problem. We shall always need to cast ourselves upon its waters as pilgrims living by faith. The masters of spiritual life show us why we always depend on the mystery and how we may come to love our constant dependence. What I have loved in contemplation is the relief it offers. My mind clatters along, hour after hour, entering into the cloud of unknowing. Finally stops my mind.

It is in that rare experience where our minds are blown (that's Krister Stendahl's definition for transcendence - that which "blows your mind"), that which is beyond our conceptual possibility, that which is the experience of the holy, that is the moment when we best bring glory to God.

John Buchanan, the pastor of The Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, tells the story of the Thanksgiving service that was held in the downtown area last year. He said it's a Monday night service and all of the pastors of the respective congregations come, and their families and a few friends, to support the ministers. But, as a matter of fact, it's on Monday night and it can't compete with Monday Night Football. A year before they had invited a Jewish congregation and that was fine. A few members of all the congregations were there again. And last year it was their turn and they decided to invite also an Islamic group and a Buddhist group. He thought to himself, "What are we doing? Are we just trying to spice this thing up? After all, we'll never make it anyway; it's the Dolphins against the 49ers tonight, you know." But, he said, he gave the greeting, and the Catholic priest from the cathedral read a lesson and the Buddhist a litany, and then an

Islamic chanter went to the lectern and, in rich, melodious tones in his beautiful voice, began to chant in Arabic lessons and prayers from the Koran. Buchanan said it was amazing.

Something happened in that congregation worshipping - they were moved. The rabbi's sermon followed, and then a soprano sang Leonard Bernstein's "A Simple Song." He said afterwards, "We all knew that something had happened!" It had occurred in the beautiful chanting of an Islamic cantor, in a foreign language to most, from another culture, but something that transcends our thinking, that touches us deeply, moving us out of ourselves, bringing us to what Paul must have meant when he said to God be glory forever and ever. In the face of this thing I can't figure out, in the face of this tragedy that I'm struggling with, in the face of the difficulties of life that seem so overwhelming - finally there comes that moment of being lost in wonder, love and praise, when from the depths one expresses what is the intention of one's life, that all of life would be glory to God forever and ever.

Sola Deo Gloria.