Reformed Catholicity

Matthew 16:15-20

Reformed Protestants are generally aware that the Reformation recovered theological truth about soteriology (how we are saved), but less about ecclesiology, how we understand the church. The reformers recovered a biblical understanding of the people of God. Phillip Schaff summarized the reformational understanding: "Protestantism is the principle of movement, of progress in the history of the church." Because Christ continually loves His people, we are *semper reformanda,* always reforming as the people of Jesus Christ.

Summary of the Text

Peter's famous answer about the identity of Jesus in Matthew 16 leads to Christ's description of the church. Ideas swirled about who Jesus was, but Peter proclaims it: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (v. 16). Jesus says he is blessed not just for what he knows, but how he knows it, revealed to him by the Father in heaven (v. 17). He is *Petros* and on this *petrai* Jesus will build His church and the gates of Hades will not withstand it (v. 18). Jesus will give him the keys of the kingdom of heaven such that whatever he binds on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever he looses on earth will be loosed in heaven (v. 19). For now, the disciples must not tell anyone (v. 20). Later, this Gospel will be published throughout the world.

Too Catholic To Be Roman

Clearly the power and authority given to Peter here does not rest with him alone. Paul says the house of God is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20), with no mention of Peter. At the Jerusalem Council, Peter speaks first but James concludes and all the apostles and elders decide together (Acts 15:7, 13, 22). Peter is the apostle to the Jews as Paul is to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:7). He is prominent in Acts until he leaves Jerusalem (Acts 12:17), and the last time he speaks is at the Jerusalem Council. While Peter is a rock and foundational stone of the new covenant church, he has no supremacy over the other apostles (e.g. Gal. 2:11). We do have examples of apostles arguing for places of prominence, but it's embarrassing and sinful (Lk. 22:24). Peter learned a wonderful lesson about claiming be the most steadfast and Christ manfully restores and prepares him to suffer (Matt. 26:33; Jn. 21:15-22). In the early church, Ignatius of Antioch (d. early 100s) thought there was no ecclesiastical authority higher than the local bishop, and even Roman Catholic theologians don't think there are popes before 150 AD and none who would have been considered to be head over all Christians in first few centuries. Just after arguing over who is the greatest, the apostle John tells Jesus they saw someone else casting out demons in His name and told him to stop since he wasn't one of them: "But Jesus said, 'Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is on our side'" (Mk. 9:39-40). Even the disciples, hand-picked and destined to rule in the kingdom, couldn't tell someone who didn't report to them that they shouldn't be doing ministry. Christ's commission started in Jerusalem and went out from there, but the church was never headquartered anywhere. It wasn't Jerusalem Catholic, Judean Catholic, but truly worldwide catholic. It makes sense to have a church in Rome, but not a worldwide Roman church in Zimbabwe.

Recognizing the Church

The Puritan Willam Perkins published *A Reformed Catholic* in 1597 to demonstrate that Protestantism upheld what the ancient church always believed and prove "the said [Roman] religion is against the catholic principles." He identifies four central grounds or principles of the true faith: the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the two sacraments. Perkins picked these four principles to challenge the headship of the pope over the church, purgatory, the worship of images and prayer to departed saints, and the idea that a propitiatory sacrifice is offered daily in the mass for the quick and the dead. In the Apostles' Creed there's no mention of the pope and no head over the church other than Jesus Christ. There's no

purgatory or meritorious works that would get you or your dead family member out of it. The Second Commandment forbids bowing down to or serving graven images whether they be of things in heaven, on earth, or in the water under the earth, even if the image is supposed to represent Yahweh (Ex. 20:4-5, 32:4). The Lord's Prayer directs us to pray daily to God alone, the only one who can hear and answer us from heaven. Perkins quotes many church fathers, including Augustine: "According to the flesh which the Word assumed, He ascended into heaven; *He is not here*. There He sits at the right hand of the Father; and He is here according to the presence of His majesty." Jesus' flesh and blood remain in heaven where He reigns after His once-and-for-all sacrifice on the cross. At the Lord's Supper He communes with us through the Holy Spirit and not through bodily presence. Perkins raises issues that continue today which plague Christian churches still identified by the two marks of word and sacrament. This was Calvin's position who wrote to Sadoleto that though the Roman clergy were ravenous wolves, "those over which you preside are Churches of Christ." In order to be a really bad church, you must be a church. The word and the sacraments can be neglected and abused and yet the sheep still exist, surviving on meager rations. Remember that in Corinth a man had his father's wife (1 Cor. 5:1). We have Christians today in Protestant churches who are confused about a baby's right to life and whether homosexual marriage is good. It's true that they may not be churches for long, but reformational Christians must call them back rather than writing them off. Those are prodigal churches.

Losing Your Lampstand

The Roman Catholic Church has something right about Matthew 16:18. They believe Jesus when He says the gates of Hades will not prevail against the church. The church will disciple the nations, besieging the city of unbelief until those gates fall. What is true of the whole, they apply to their part, of course because they think they're the whole. But Rome isn't *the* church, it's *a* church, which we know because Paul told them as much in his letter: "You will say then, 'Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.' Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either" (Rom. 11:19-21). God didn't spare the Jews but cut them out of the vine, so Rome should take it to heart. But so should we. This applies to all churches. If the saints in Ephesus don't repent, Jesus will remove their lampstand (Rev. 2:5). What enormous encouragement to be faithful and have confidence that God is working. Diseased branches can come back to health, rebellious ones will be dealt with, and healthy one pruned to bear much fruit.

The Protestant Future

Christ gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teaches to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for edifying the body, "till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). One of the beliefs of both the Roman and Eastern churches is that they're *the* true or primary church. Some Protestants also think (or act like) this about their church or denomination, but they need not. Christ will sanctify us out of these schisms, which is different than wanting centralized and bureaucratized church. If we jump the gun, we go in for the ecumenical group hug, choosing unity over truth. If we speak the truth in pride, we pit truth against unity. He is at work in the visible church, His bride, comprised of every local congregation united by faith in our risen savior, gathered by the word proclaimed, marked by baptism into the trinity, and fed at the Lord's Table.