

“Reformed to the Core” based on Matthew 22:34-46

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, Oct. 29, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

I've been spending a lot of time lately with three friends. Each of these friends is brilliant. I'm in awe of just how smart they really are. Now, I find that I don't agree with them always, even though I know I'm not as smart as they are. I had a professor once who explained this by saying, "If Rudolf Bultman walked into this classroom, he would be the smartest person in the room, but that doesn't mean he'd be right."

I feel that way with my friends, because as much as they have in common with each other, they don't agree with each other. The most volatile one, probably would kill the other two, if he weren't restrained from doing so by many factors. All three are devout Christians in different traditions, and that makes me, personally love them more, even though I know they can't stand each other.

The eldest friend celebrated his birthday yesterday, but few if any noticed really. I forgot myself. You see, he came from a humble beginning – his father was a Roman Catholic priest, so that makes things awkward with the vows of celibacy. His mom cleaned the rectory where the priest lived and well, it just happened. They tried to make the most of it, even putting him in a great school, but sadly, both parents died when he was just about 17. I think though his sadness is probably why he is the funniest of the three. He's the biggest reason any of us know each other.

The middle friend is the most volatile one. He is the son of a copper miner. He has long struggled with guilt and anger, and judgement, and recently constipation. All three love a good argument, but this friend always knows how to make it personal. He knows how to hit that dig. He's probably the least bright of the three, even though he's way smarter than me. But the most passionate. Now, I don't mean to diminish his intelligence by any means. It's just that his emotions often get the most of him.

The youngest came from the most privileged home of the three and he is the least emotional. He's probably the smartest of the three and dad wanted him to be a lawyer. Now, that doesn't mean he's a robot – he's got a flare for the dramatic too. One of his best moves is always threatening to leave if you don't agree with him. "Oh, you don't want to do it my way, then I'll just leave," he might say, and we respond, "No, stay." He's manipulative. He's also the most misunderstood as well.

What fascinates me most about these friends is that they learned more than I'll ever know, and yet, not one has a smart phone. None of them knows how to use a computer. Yet, the oldest one taught himself ancient Greek and he became a foremost expert in it. The younger two never became experts, but they learned Greek too, and added in Hebrew. Both have translated the bible, writing commentaries and many books on theology.

They did all of this without the Internet, or a typewriter. They had no software, or even a ballpoint pen. They had no dictionaries, or light bulbs. They didn't have much paper either, and what they had was made from old clothes. And certainly, they had no electricity – not at home, or at work.

As you may now have guessed, my friends are all dead. But I have spent a lot of time with them lately, immersed in their world, their thinking, their arguments with each other, and more. There is a tendency in the modern world to look back at the people before us, and we compare them to ourselves and our advanced society, we think we are smarter than they were.

We judge them as backwards, unintelligent, or generally inferior, when we compare them to ourselves. You see we have since had the Renaissance Era, or re-birth, in Europe, and we had the Enlightenment Era that came afterward to take us out of the darkness and made us snobs for our present time.

I would argue that my three friends – Erasmus of Rotterdam, the oldest, Martin Luther, the middle child and volatile one, and John Calvin – are among the most intelligent humans to have ever lived and worthy of respect. This doesn't mean we have to agree with everything they said. As I said, they don't agree with each other, but what they have at their core is special. There's a tendency in certain circles to say, "Well, I'm smart, that's why I don't believe in God." Well, trust me buddy, you are not as smart as these three, so let's not use intelligence as reason to believe or not believe.

But unfortunately, these three are also partly responsible for the attitude we have today toward the past. The Reformation has changed the way we look at things. Erasmus is said to have set up the bonfire and Luther lit the match that ignited the Reformation some 506 years ago in Germany. Erasmus did so by challenging the authority of a bible. No, not the bible itself, but the Latin Vulgate translation, which was the official translation by the scholar Jerome, 1000 years earlier, who put the Greek and Hebrew into the common Latin so the common person could read it and understand.

There's a lot of irony here. We are often told the Reformation was about putting scripture back into the people's language. But what had happened was the church put the scripture into everyone's language, but then everyone stopped speaking Latin. If the people had just kept speaking Latin, it would have been fine. It's their fault. But no, it's not. What happened is what was meant to make the bible accessible for reading and hearing by all people, eventually made it inaccessible.

Erasmus wanted to go back to the sources, to the oldest manuscripts of the bible, before the work done by Jerome and provide a fresh translation, relevant again to the people, which would become a text in native languages recited while at the plow, working in the fields, or discussed in storefronts, among the everyday shoppers. And so, without a computer, or even a car to go from place to place, Erasmus compiled all the old manuscripts he could find. He tried for the first time to create a critical edition, that might best reflect the original text.

We celebrate the work of Erasmus, and then Luther who put scripture in German, and Calvin, whose work led to the bible in French and English editions of the bible. Putting the bible into the vernacular, into the language of the people, is important. This is exactly what Jerome had done and this is what I've talked about with the perpetual need for new translations.

It's not God's Word which changes but our languages and the way we speak them that changes. We don't say "thee" or "thou" anymore, so the King James feels distant. Word's change in meaning, like how "perfect" used to mean complete, but now it means unblemished. When those things happen, despite the German of Luther being considered by many to be the highpoint of the German language, and the King James being said to be the highpoint of our own language, we still need more and more translations.

These reformers introduced a widespread belief that we must be critical of the past, but I do not believe their intent was ever to undo our reverence or respect for the past. Their intent, which they said repeatedly, was not to destroy the Catholic church, but to recover the catholic faith. The were

going back to the sources by being conservative for the sake of progress, so that by reforming its ways, the true church might be holy.

Beloved, this is what we see in our scripture today in the Words of the Lord Jesus. This is the final test from the Jewish leaders in Matthew's gospel. The Pharisees have challenged his authority to preach and do miracles. Their disciples and the Herodians challenged Jesus about the power of Rome. Then the Sadducees, the priests, tested him on the resurrection, and the authority of which scriptures are most important. Now, a Pharisee and Scribe challenge Jesus on the law, again wanting him to say what is scripture.

They want to know if he knows scripture and if he's faithful to it. This is behind their question, "Which commandment is the greatest?" And so, Jesus takes the "shema," the most revered command of the Torah, and says to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. In this way, he is saying that he is not at odds with their beliefs, but he wants them to know that what they see as change is consistent with the core faith. The progress of Jesus is not something innovative, but it is reformed to the core, the center, the very place at which faith begins. He doesn't represent a change or elimination of Hebrew scripture but a fulfillment of it and what it means.

And in a similar move, he equates this first command with another from Leviticus, stating, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," because all the instruction, all of the law, the Torah, the scripture beloved by every sect that challenged him centers on this. As does, all of the prophets, those accused of being innovators before Jesus, all of these scriptures hang on these two commandments. It's all about loving God and loving neighbor. This is Jesus's version of going back to the sources.

But then, he throws in a twist in a riddle about whose son the Messiah is supposed to be. So Jesus again points to the scripture they revere in Psalm 110, and says that David is calling the Messiah Lord, so I don't think that's his son. You see, in Jewish thought at the time, there were some contemplating this very thing, that within the single godhead, there may be a multitude of persons – even a Trinity before Jesus arrived. It was a minority opinion, but they saw things like what Jesus points out here.

And so, the message of Jesus is simple: I agree with your foundation, but part of that foundation if you go back to its source, the scripture, is the recognition of who God is in full, and that he, Jesus, in being the Messiah, is one with God.

You see, if we are to love God and love neighbor to be followers of the One True God, then it stands to reason that we should know who God is, and who our neighbor is. And so, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus here clarifies what his claim is as Messiah. He says he is the God of Israel in the flesh of Israel, sharing our humanity, our humanity, to live as we live, and in the end, he will die for us on the cross, only to rise again for us, so that by his life, death, resurrection, and his ascension, all might come to know the Father, and become temples of the Holy Spirit. We are then to share share in the work of new creation, which Jesus the Son inaugurated with the ministry of reconciliation, until all things are under him,

Beloved, this is our core – this is the Historic Faith of the Christian church. Yet, how often do we see so many things – many of which are beautiful, even true – obscuring our view so we cannot recognize this basic reality of who God is, what God has done, and what we are called to do based

on the revelation of Jesus Christ. How much gets lumped onto loving the Triune God, in and through the love of our neighbors? To be reformed to the core, we must focus, keeping our eyes on Jesus on that cross and in the face of our neighbors – those sitting across from you here and in the world.

Reform means dismantling some things. It does. That's what the reformers did and it's what Jesus did too, but always for us to rebuild on the same foundation. A popular word today is deconstruction nowadays, and it's good to deconstruct some, but if we never reconstruct, it is not reform but chaos and disorder that result.

There are many parallels in our day and age to the time of Jesus and the time of the Reformers. Most notably, Jesus's age was an unprecedented moment for the spread of information over and across Roman roads and the Mediterranean Sea like never before. Flash forward to the age of the Reformers, and the printing press had arrived and revolutionized the world, allowing for information to be mass produced and spread very quickly.

And today, we look down on those innovations because we have the Internet. "Bam!" It's there. Anything we could ever want, fast. We've got all the information we need and we're smarter than everyone else because we have a YouTube channel that said something. Ah, YouTube, the bane of my existence. The spirit of deconstruction is strong – but without a foundation, we will continue to see chaos looming.

The reformers had their many flaws and I'm not going to ignore the division they caused. Erasmus, Luther, and Calvin never saw eye to eye fully, nor could their followers. But Erasmus, even among those who talked bad about him, succeeded in creating reform in the Roman Catholic Church. Luther was excommunicated and in hiding, sometimes fighting with his own people, which may have been the cause of his constipation, but he still opened the door for a free debate of theology.

Calvin always threatened to leave when he didn't get his way, but created a means by which the full scope of scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, could be the foundation upon which we are all grounded, finding coherence and unity.

They left the foundation, and so our challenge today is to follow their lead. We live in a world of division and strife – the news of war, mass shootings, and extremists – all of which loom over our heads. But my hope is that we as Christians might lead the way being Reformed to our core, always pointing to the person and work of Jesus as the Truth – the way, the truth, and the life as he put it – reaching out to this world because he is pursuing us. He calls us to know that we are loved, and to accept this love, be transformed, or reformed by the renewal of our minds.

May we have the humility to learn from those who have gone before us, and not just think our smart phone makes us smart. Let's have the courage to love God with our whole selves, because that word we translate as soul means our being and our whole identity. Let's have the courage then to not just say these great commandments but live them out. My hope is that we would show everyone around us around us the heart of our faith, through our hearts, remade, while using our minds to discern what is true and trustworthy. This is how we love God and it starts by applying all of these things to our love for our neighbor. Amen.