

What is a Reformed Church?

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THE term 'Reformed' has received considerable prominence in recent years. It has become quite common to speak and hear of Reformed doctrine, Reformed practice, Reformed worship etc., but it is to be feared that many Christians are still unsure about the precise meaning of the term. What exactly does it mean? And what kind of church is designated by it? To answer such questions, we need to study the usage of the term in history, especially in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Historical Basis

Originally, of course, the term was used at the time of Reformation and with more or less the same latitude as the term Protestant. Reformed Churches were churches which protested against prevailing error and corruption and which ultimately renounced communion with the apostate Church of Rome. Martin Luther had issued the clearest of calls, writing in 1518, 'The Church needs a reformation. This reformation...is the concern of all Christendom, or better still, of God alone'. By the time of Luther's death, many churches in Germany and elsewhere had returned to the Gospel and to the pristine purity of early Christianity. These were the churches of the Reformation or - as Luther preferred to call them - the Evangelical Churches. The word Reformed was first used as another name for Protestants in 1561, at a conference at Poissy, near Paris, in France.

Later, however, the designation Reformed was employed to distinguish the Calvinists from the Lutherans. The Calvinists were the followers of John Calvin, who carefully stated and systematized the theology of the Reformation. Calvin, believing Scripture to be the only reliable source of the knowledge of God, taught from that Scripture the absolute omnipotence of God and especially did he

exalt the grace of God in the work of man's salvation. Holding God to be sovereign, Calvin insisted that God's Word alone should order the affairs of his Church: hence, he established a true and proper form of church government and the correct way in which God should be worshipped in public assemblies. Those who embraced Calvin's teachings were called 'the Church Reformed according to the Word of God', a rather cumbersome title which subsequently was shortened to 'the Reformed Church'. As far we can tell this designation was first used in the more restricted sense in Article VI of the Treaty of Westphalia, a treaty framed and ratified in 1648 to secure for Lutheran and Calvinistic churches equal rights with Roman Catholic churches within the limits and boundaries of the Roman Empire.

As Calvinistic Protestantism developed, the term underwent one further refinement. It came to be applied to English Puritanism. This movement inherited Calvin's theological legacy but expanded his teaching on law, grace, and the covenants; and, believing the visible Church to be still corrupted with the remains of Popery, it sought a further reformation according to the Word of God. In their attempts at thorough reform, the Puritans pointed out that unbiblical forms, ceremonies, and vestments had already been abolished by the Reformed Churches on the Continent. They believed the English Church was hardly deserving of the epithet Reformed. It was, they said, only 'half-reformed'. Puritanism therefore became responsible for that remarkable document, 'The Solemn League and Covenant', to which the Westminster Assembly subscribed in 1643. This aimed at a 'reformation of religion in the kingdoms of England and Ireland, in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government,

according to the Word of God, and the example of the best reformed churches’.

In the light of the above, we can only deplore the way some have attacked this title and publicly disassociated themselves from the Reformed tradition. To be Reformed, in the historic sense, is to be Protestant, Calvinistic, and Puritan. This is something none of us should repudiate: on the contrary, it is something we should boldly and unitedly confess!

Biblical Basis

Thus far we have dealt with the subject historically. It is now time to consider it rather more biblically and, in doing so, to mark the leading distinctives of a Reformed church.

First of all, a Reformed church believes that the Bible in its entirety is God’s written Word, without error or fault of any kind, and that it is therefore the sole authoritative expression of the Divine will for all aspects of church life. This was certainly the view of the great Reformers. We find Luther, for example, referring to the Scriptures as ‘pure truth’ which ‘cannot err’. Calvin, too, affirmed the divine nature and total veracity of these Scriptures, describing them as ‘infallible oracles’ which inspiration has rendered ‘free from every stain and defect’.

For Calvin and the Puritans, however, God’s Word was also the ‘sceptre’ by which he ruled his Church or special Kingdom. As William Tyndale wrote: ‘In the kingdom of Christ, and in his church or congregation, and in his councils, the ruler is the scripture...’ His exhortation was as follows: ‘Without God’s Word do nothing. And to his Word add nothing; neither pull anything there from... Serve God as he hath appointed thee...’

This is a thoroughly biblical principle. In every age, God has given detailed instructions for church worship, government, and practice, while at the same time declaring his abhorrence of all human devices and innovations. ‘What thing soever I command

you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it’ (Deut 12:32). If the Lord’s people deviate to any degree from Scripture’s precise rule, they come under that very solemn and fearful indictment, ‘Their fear towards me is taught by the precepts of men’ (Is 29:13,14). Quoting these words, the Lord Jesus declared that worship performed on such a basis was ‘in vain’ or ‘to no purpose’ (Matt 15:9). Similarly, we find the apostle warning against ‘commandments of men, that turn from the truth’ (Titus 1:14) and also of the inevitable result of such departure in ‘will worship’ (Col 2:23).

Secondly, a Reformed church magnifies and exalts the Word of God, especially in its worship where preaching will always have the central place. The Church of Rome degraded the Holy Scriptures by alloying the purity of the Canon with her apocryphal additions, by supplementing the inspired records with an enormous mass of spurious traditions, by admitting only that interpretation which is according to ‘the unanimous consent of the Fathers’ and ‘the Holy Mother Church’, and, particularly by diminishing the role of preaching as their ‘priests’ busied themselves with miraculous stories about Mary, the saints and the images, and magnified the importance of the ‘Mass’, with its elaborate and multiplied ceremonies and rituals.

It was thus that preaching deteriorated and, in fact, almost disappeared. The Reformers vigorously protested against this and contended with all their might for the recovery of the God’s Holy Word. Great was their devotion to God’s truth! ‘Better’, Luther used to say, ‘better heaven and earth should be blended together in confusion, than that one dust of God’s truth should perish’, while Calvin spoke of the Scriptures as the ‘eternal and inviolable truth of God’, and repeatedly asserted that ‘we owe to the Scripture the same reverence which we owe to God, because it has proceeded from him alone, and has nothing of man mixed with it’.

On account of this new emphasis, preaching was

brought into renewed prominence. Luther admitted in one of his letters to Bucer, ‘Often I preached four times on one day.’ Similarly, Calvin, in Geneva, preached twice on the Lord’s Days and three times in the week, but in 1542 he was urged to preach more often, which he did for a time until his health suffered under the increased strain. Knox preached just as often and so powerfully that Melville (a young student at the time) tells how he could no longer hold his pen to take notes. This Reformer went so far as to say that he would more gladly spend ‘fifteen hours’ preaching God’s Word than ‘half an hour in any other matter’. All the Reformers felt like that. It was fundamental to their whole outlook. The exposition and application of the Word was of paramount importance to them, and they did not conceal that fact. A congregation which tires of preaching and loses its love for the truth moves at once from a biblical Reformed position. We can only deplore the fact that there has been such a falling away in this land from Reformation standards, both of preaching and of hearing. It has brought, and will bring, judgment upon the Church.

Our Lord and his Apostles taught the importance of preaching (Lk 24:27; 2 Tim 4:2). The central function of the Ministry (Rom 10:15; Eph 4:11), it becomes the central act in the public worship of the Church (Acts 15:35; 20:7). ‘Thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name’ (Ps 138:2).

Thirdly, a Reformed church recognizes the sovereign and awesome majesty of God, whose determinate decree, before the world and time, is the ultimate reason for all things being as they are. In Calvin’s theology this truth assumed a prominent place. Calvin wrote in his ‘Institutes’: ‘We hold that God is the dispenser and ruler of all things, that from the remotest eternity, according to his own wisdom, he decreed what he was to do, and now by his own power executes what he decreed. Hence we maintain that by his providence, not heaven and earth and inanimate creatures only, but also

the counsels and wills of men are so governed as to move exactly in the course which he has destined’.

In an address to commemorate the 400th anniversary of John Calvin’s birth, Dr Benjamin Warfield remarked that ‘It is the vision of God and his Majesty...which lies at the foundation of the entirety of Calvinistic thinking’. He went on to say, ‘The Calvinist is the man who has seen God, and who, having seen God in his glory, is filled on the one hand, with a sense of his own unworthiness to stand in God’s sight, as a creature, and much more as a sinner, and, on the other hand, with adoring wonder that nevertheless this God is a God who receives sinners’.

Scripture everywhere represents God as the absolute monarch who reigns over everything that is, was or ever shall be. As David once said, ‘The Lord hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all’ (Ps 103:19; cf. 93:1; Dan 4:34, 35; Rev 19:6). By the eternal counsel of his will, he has appointed the course of nature and directed the course of history (Ps 33:11; 148:5, 6; Jer 5:22; 10; 23; Acts 4:27, 28; Eph 1:11). His ultimate objective has always been to manifest the divine excellence, thereby promoting his worship and glory. ‘For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever’ (Rom 11:36; cf. Ps 145:10; Rev 4:11).

Worship which is truly Reformed will therefore be characterised by holy reverence, deep humility, and profound adoration. ‘God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of his saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him’ (Ps 89:7; cf. 5:7; 76:11, 12).

Fourthly, a Reformed church, adhering to a theological system which teaches that salvation is wholly God’s work, avows the firmest belief in those truths which are commonly called “the Doctrines of Grace”. In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, Reformed churches were troubled by

the errors of Arminianism. James Arminius (1560-1609), who had studied at Geneva under Theodore Beza (Calvin's colleague and successor), became a preacher at Amsterdam and eventually a professor at the University of Leyden. Through his sermons and lectures, he made it increasingly clear that he had adopted new views which were at variance with Scripture and the Reformed Faith. Disputes arose during his life-time, but it was after his death, in 1610, that his followers drew up a petition called a 'Remonstrance' which set forth their teachings in five articles. These were finally presented to the National Synod of Dort (which included delegates from other countries, even from England). The Synod condemned the doctrines of Arminius and set forth the true Reformed theology in five other articles, which ever since have been called 'The Five Points of Calvinism'. In brief, these are as follows:

(1) Total Depravity. This doctrine asserts that, as a result of the Fall, men are alienated from God, subject to the corrupting power of sin, and in a totally helpless and hopeless condition (Ps 14:2,3; Mk 7:21,22; Jn 6:64-66; Rom 9:16).

(2) Unconditional Election. By this is meant that God, from all eternity, has sovereignly elected some sinners to be saved through Jesus Christ; and this election was not in foresight of belief or holiness in sinners, but solely on account of his free and distinguishing grace (Ps 65:4; Matt 22:13; Acts 13:48; Rom 9:10-13; Eph 1:4,5; 2 Thess 2:13).

(3) Limited Atonement. Sometimes referred to as Particular Redemption, this point simply affirms that Christ died for God's elect, and for them only (Lk 1:68; Jn 10:11; Acts 20:28; Rom 8:33, 34; Rev 5:9).

(4) Irresistible Grace. Here, we are confronted with the fact that when God calls elect sinners to faith through the Gospel, the Holy Spirit effects such a change in them that, contrary to all expectations, they are brought to the reception of the truth and participation in Christ's salvation (Ezek 36:26,27;

Matt 11:25-27; Jn 6:44,45; Acts 18:27; Rom 8:30; 2 Tim 1:9).

(5) Perseverance of the Saints. According to this final tenet, God so preserves true believers by his grace and power that they can never totally or finally fall away, but they persevere to the end and obtain everlasting life and glory (Jn 10:28,29; Rom 8:38,39; 1 Cor 1:6-8; Phil 1:6; 1 Pet 1:5).

Reformed Ministers will regularly preach on these themes. They will also expose and refute the errors of insurgent Arminianism. As a result, their people will be grounded in the Faith of the Reformation.

Fifthly, a Reformed church understands that a covenant is at the heart of God's relationship with man, and therefore it lays emphasis upon the way Scripture unfolds and develops God's Covenant of Grace. Federal or Covenant theology was, in the words of Professor John Murray, 'a distinguishing feature of the Reformed tradition'. The earliest of the Reformers rediscovered this biblical teaching and began to explore its spiritual riches. As early as 1561, Zacharius Ursinus, a professor at Heidelberg, referred to a covenant made with Adam before the Fall, while, in 1576, Caspar Olevianus, a colleague of Ursinus's, taught that there was another covenant, fulfilled in Christ. This covenant effectually secured the everlasting salvation of God's elect people. Thereafter, covenantal teaching spread throughout the Reformed world.

God did indeed enter into a covenant with Adam and, through him, with all whom he represented, that is with all mankind. In that covenant, life was promised upon condition of pure obedience (hence its name: 'the covenant of works'); but Adam broke that covenant incurring for himself and all men the penalty of physical, spiritual and eternal death (Gen 2:16, 17 cf. Hos 6:7 margin; Rom 5:12).

However, in anticipation of Adam's sin, God was pleased to establish an eternal covenant with his Son, the Head and Representative of the elect (Gal

3:17; Eph 3:11; 2 Tim 1:9; Heb 12:24). In this covenant ('the covenant of grace'), the Father promised to give elect sinners everlasting life, providing his Son voluntarily engaged to become man, subject himself to the Law, and fulfil the necessary condition, which consisted in holiness of nature, obedience of life, and suffering of death (Gal 4:4; Phil 2:8; Heb 7:26. Titus 1:2; 1 Jn 5:11). This was agreed upon by the Father and the Son, with the Holy Spirit concurring (Zech 6:13; Heb 13:20). What a wonderful arrangement it was! All covenant blessings are now at Christ's disposal. Then faith is imparted and Christ is received, these blessings are immediately enjoyed. 'He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life' (Jn 3:36).

The administration of this covenant produces the Church, which is God's Covenant Society. Its members are the objects of his loving care and they are distinguished from others by high privileges: not least among them, the possession of sacred ordinances and the gracious indwelling of the Holy Spirit. As the People of the Covenant, the Church (and this applies to each particular church) must show itself separated from false doctrine and practice and united in the blessed fellowship of faithful men and women. This should be true of any church which calls itself Reformed. It should heed the apostle's exhortation: 'Walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory' (1 Thess 2:12; cf. 2 Cor 6:16-18; 1 Pet 2:9).

Sixthly, a Reformed church is committed to the work of bringing the gospel of salvation to the unconverted, not only in its own vicinity but also in other areas of the country and in other parts of the world. Historically, reformation and evangelism have gone hand in hand. In the year 1556, fourteen missionaries were sent by the Church of Geneva to spread the Christian Faith in the newly discovered regions of South America. In 1559, Protestants in Sweden took the Gospel to the people of Lapland; and in 1562, French Protestants evangelized Florida and, afterwards, Carolina. Among the first Puritan

missionaries were the Pilgrim Fathers. Arriving at New Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1620, they organized a mission as early as 1621 'to promote the conversion of the Indians'. Contrary to what some have suggested, the spirit of the Reformers and Puritans was intensely evangelistic.

It is the duty of the Church to evangelize. Christ has commanded his Church through the eleven disciples to tell people everywhere the way of God's salvation. 'Go ye therefore, and teach (or, make disciples of) all nations' (Matt 28:18-20; cf. Mk 16:15, 16; Lk 24:46-49; Jn 20:21-22; Acts 1:8-10). This matter is no side issue. It should be our main work - to tell out the glories of God as they are displayed in the grand scheme of our redemption. Why? Because only so will the divine purpose be accomplished and 'the earth...be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea' (Hab 2:14; cf. Is 11:9). As Martin Bucer once observed, 'The Church is the City of God where God will rule by his Word and Spirit more than anywhere else in the world, and from whence he will spread his saving knowledge in all the earth'.

Will this come to pass if ministers confine their preaching to the faithful gathered in various chapel-buildings? No, it certainly will not! That is why Christ told his disciples to pray that God would 'send forth labourers' (Matt 9:38; cf. Jn 15:16 - 'ye should go and bring forth fruit'). 'The word of the Lord' must therefore have 'free course', speeding its way throughout the whole world, if it is to be 'glorified' in the revelation of glorious truths and in the production of glorious effects (2 Thess 3:1).

Judged by this standard, some churches are totally unworthy of the name 'Reformed'.

Seventhly, a Reformed church stresses the need for an inward, spiritual experience of God's saving grace, which creates such gratitude that the Law is readily followed as the holy rule of all conduct. Luther tells us in his own words of his conversion

to Christ. In search of forgiveness and peace, he began to study the Scriptures and more especially the Epistle to the Romans. There, the Gospel was revealed to him and he discovered salvation in Christ. 'Straightway', he says, 'I felt as if I were born anew. It was as if I had found the door of Paradise thrown wide open'. Calvin had a similar story to tell. His account of the way God dealt with him is sadly quite brief, but he says: 'What happened first was that by an unexpected conversion he tamed to teachableness a mind too stubborn for its years - for I was so strongly devoted to the superstitions of the Papacy that nothing less could draw me from such depths of mire. And so this mere taste of true godliness that I received set me on fire...'

The spiritual autobiographies of the 17th century show how important 'experience' was to the Puritans. Space only allows me to give one example here but, believe me, it is typical of many others. Thomas Goodwin was at Cambridge when he heard a sermon which changed his heart and life. As with the others, what happened is best told by the convert himself. 'God was pleased', he wrote, 'on the sudden, and as it were in an instant, to alter the whole course of his former dispensation towards me, and said of and to my soul, "Yea live, yea live I say"...so he created and put new life and spirit into my soul, and so great an alteration was strange to me'.

The Puritans believed that this kind of personal experience would produce a life of obedience. Richard Sibbes comments, 'The sense of the love of Christ in pardoning of sins will constrain one to a holy violence in the performing of all duties'.

This, of course, is sound biblical teaching. God's undeserved love to sinners, revealed in the gospel of salvation, is something to be known not merely intellectually, but experimentally. The apostle distinguishes between the two when he recalls how some 'heard' and then 'knew the grace of God in truth' (Col 1:6; cf. Eph 1:13). Felt grace, however, does

not destroy a believer's obligation to keep the Law: rather, it strengthens that obligation, by supplying new motives, abilities, and encouragements. The believer has received 'mercy' and he has the assistance of 'the holy Spirit': furthermore, he has the promise of a very gracious spiritual 'reward' (Ps 19:11; Ezek 11:16; 1 Pet 2:10). It is, in fact, his whole new relationship with Christ which binds him - 'being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ (i.e. as one of the Lord's people, desirous of pleasing him)' (1 Cor 9:21. See also: Matt 5:17-19; Rom 3:31; 7:22; James 2:8, 10-11).

Reformation religion is essentially experimental. The Reformed should have an all consuming desire to know God. They should also desire to be like him in holiness and, since this is so clearly expressed in the moral law, they should love that law and always follow it as the rule of life.

Eighthly, a Reformed church longs to see the Visible Church restored to its scriptural pattern in government, worship and practice, and therefore it prays, strives, and works for the greater purity of itself and the whole Church of Christ. This all the Reformers did. John Knox did not hesitate to do all within his power to promote the work of reformation, 'that the reverent face of the primitive and apostolic Church should be reduced again to the eyes and knowledge of men'. All those who claim to be successors to the Reformers ought to be manifesting the same concern for the church in these days, so that pure worship, sound preaching and the faithful exercise of discipline being restored to her, the church may stand once again in her original beauty and strength.

God, who anciently was pleased to make known his 'pattern' for the Tabernacle and the Temple (Exod 25:40; 1 Chron 28:11,12), has in these new covenant days revealed his 'pattern' for the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ (Matt 28:20; Acts 1:2,3; 1 Cor 4:17; 11:1,2). The enemy, over many years, may have marred and spoiled this outward form, but a

Reformed church is resolved 'to build the old waste places' and '(to) raise up the foundations of many generations', fervently praying as it does so, 'Do good in thy good pleasure unto Zion: build thou the walls of Jerusalem' (Ps 51:18; Is 58:12).

In the opinion of some, increasing numbers of people attending services are all-important. We are not of that opinion. There is something more important than church growth: it is to build up such a church on earth as may be described as 'the house of the Lord's glory'. In 1851 J. H. Thornwell wrote to his wife, sharing with her the burden of his heart: 'I am anxious to have an eye single to God's glory. If it were my purpose to please the people, I could soon gather a large congregation; but I want to build up a spiritual church, and that cannot be done without the special agency of the Holy Ghost. I could soon draw around me those who have itching ears; but I wish to attract people, not to myself, but to the cross of my divine Redeemer.' 'Such a work requires patience, watchfulness, and prayer.'

The Church of Christ is to-day beset by many strong assailants, and insidious forces are undermining her strength. Corruptions have already dreadfully marred her. Reformation is the crying need of the time. The call to every true believer must be to return wholeheartedly to the true Reformed religion. That done, though superstition be leagued with unbelief against her, the church shall stand unmoved, to the praise of 'the God of our fathers' and 'our God'.

Ninthly, a Reformed church encourages the spirit of true devotion which finds expression in lives wholly consecrated to God and his service. Calvin's emblem was a hand holding out a heart to God, and his motto - 'My heart, as having been offered up, I present in sacrifice unto the Lord'. Writing of the Christian life, Calvin remarks: 'Now the great thing is this: we are consecrated and dedicated to God in order that we may thereafter think, speak, meditate,

and do, nothing except to his glory...We are God's: let us therefore live for him and die for him...' This is the Reformed philosophy. Those who embrace it are willing to be mastered by God.

What does the New Testament say? 'Whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's' (Rom 14:8). And again, 'Ye are not your own...Ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's' (1 Cor 6:19, 20). If our church really is Biblical and Reformed, its members will be fully committed and most zealous for the cause of God and Truth. Let us look to our hearts. How much do we love the Lord? What kind of service do we offer him? Could it be that some of us are 'Reformed' in name only?

Tenthly, and lastly, a Reformed church, recognizing the reason for its existence, has a supreme and profound regard to the glory of God. Calvin's most prominent thought was God in his transcendent majesty. The entire world has been created as a place for the display of his glory; but in his Church, where that glory is perceived and admired, there is the highest manifestation of his glory as chosen, redeemed and called sinners own their complete dependence on his free mercy and grace, and serve him in such a way as to bring to him all due honour and praise (1 Cor 6:19, 20). This is man's 'chief end': it is 'to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever.'

A Reformed church, therefore, seeks not to be popular with men but to be faithful to God. In its worship and witness, it will maintain the highest standards and employ its noblest powers, resolutely refusing to accommodate itself to an increasingly wicked world. May the Church, in these latter days, appear as 'the throne of his glory' (Jer 14:21); and 'unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end (Eph 3:21)!