What Is Reformed Theology?

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Have you ever asked or been asked the following questions: Are you Reformed? When did you become Reformed? Is this a Reformed church? These questions are common, but they can be surprisingly difficult to answer.1

So, what is Reformed theology? At its most basic level, the term Reformed theology refers to the theological conclusions flowing out of the Protestant Reformation. The early Reformers, such as Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin, had sharp and specific criticisms of late medieval Roman Catholic theology. The Reformers rejected the Roman Catholic teaching on the nature of justification and the place of individual saving faith. They also rejected the Roman Catholic claims about the authority of the pope, asserting that the Bible alone held the place of final authority in discussions of doctrine. Further, they rejected the Roman Catholic understanding of worship and the place and meaning of the sacraments of baptism and communion.

Today, when the term Reformed theology is used, it often refers to something less historical. Often it refers to a theology that acknowledges the doctrine of predestination and holds to a high view of the Bible as God's inerrant Word. Sometimes it is also identified with the so-called five points of Calvinism: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints. These are all important teachings of the Reformed tradition, but they do not fully encapsulate or describe Reformed theology.

A better starting place is five statements that have been called the five solas of the Reformation. These five solas (sola is the Latin word for "only" or "alone") are sola Scriptura (Scripture alone), sola fide (faith alone), sola gratia (grace alone), solus Christus (Christ alone), and soli Deo gloria (God's glory alone). Put together, these solas clearly express the central concerns of the Protestant Reformation, which was about worship and authority within the church as much as it was about individual salvation. The "alone" in each is vital, and they emphasize the sufficiency of God's Word and the gracious nature of salvation, received by faith alone, in Christ alone. The last of the five solas, soli Deo gloria, is the natural outworking of the first four. It reminds us that Reformed theology understands all of life in terms of the glory of God. To be Reformed in our thinking is to be God-centered. Salvation is from the Lord from beginning to end, and even our existence is a gift from Him.

Beyond the five solas, there are two more aspects of Reformed theology to highlight. The first is the doctrine of the covenant. In the Scriptures, we see that God works out His saving purposes by means of successive covenants. In fact, the Bible speaks of an overarching "eternal covenant," centered on the cross of Christ (Heb. 13:20). Covenants provide the biblical framework for understanding God's work in Christ and His dealings with His people throughout history. The centrality of this covenantal structure in the Bible and the Christian life can hardly be overstated, and the ramifications for recognizing this central theme in the Scriptures are quite significant. Indeed, this is one of the reasons why merely emphasizing predestination, or even the five points of Calvinism, does not do justice to what it means to be a Reformed Christian. Reformed theology is whole-Bible theology, and the covenant is the biblical framework that shows the unity of both the Old Testament and the New, centering on the Lord Jesus Christ.

In addition, all vibrant and enduring expressions of Reformed Christianity have confessions of faith that give expressions to their convictions. The best known of the mature Reformed confessions include the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort (which together are called the

Three Forms of Unity), and the Westminster Confession of Faith, which has its own catechisms. From its earliest days, it was assumed that Reformed theology would be expressed in confessions of faith. Therefore, to be Reformed is to be confessional, and to be a Reformed church is to be a place in which one of these historic confessions is professed, taught, and followed.

What is Reformed theology? It is a theology that 1) affirms the five solas with all their implications; 2) recognizes the centrality of the covenant in God's saving purposes; and 3) is expressed in a historic and public confession of faith.

Reformed theology is a blessing to God's people. In our salvation, in our worship, in our churches, and in our families, God is sovereign, and He is at work accomplishing His purposes. To God alone be all the glory.2

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

"For who has known the mind of the Lord,

or who has been his counselor?"

"Or who has given a gift to him

that he might be repaid?"

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33–36)

Much of this material is summarized and adapted from my book, Reformed Theology (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2023). The book contains a fuller treatment of this question and a fuller description of Reformed theology and its benefits.

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