

Title: What is Reformed Theology?

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Purpose of This Study

The purpose of this study is to try to understand the system of doctrine that is called by the name “reformed.” This will help you understand the word when you encounter it as part of other phrases. For example:

1. A **reformed pastor** is a pastor who holds to the reformed system of doctrine. In the 1600s, Richard Baxter wrote a book *The Reformed Pastor* and it has become a classic work, convicting the hearts of many pastors to excel in their ministry.
2. A **reformed church**: “Grace Bible Church is an independent, reformed evangelical fellowship. GBC is ‘reformed’ in that we trace our roots doctrinally to the Protestant Reformation. Distinctively, we are reformed Baptists in that we hold to the London Baptist Confession of Faith written in 1689, and we practice believer baptism by immersion only.”

Importance of This Study

Reformed theology has experienced a resurgence in the last 40 years. We need to be aware of it because many popular authors teach it.

Many new parachurch fellowships have a doctrinal basis in Reformed theology (9 Marks, Together 4 the Gospel, The Gospel Coalition, Acts 29). Many Southern Baptists have adopted reformed thinking.

Though these men and groups may teach many good things, there are some areas in which caution is imperative. We may enjoy brief fellowship with a church that is reformed, but we need to understand if we can or cannot have close fellowship over a longer period of time.

What Reformed is Not

1. It is not Catholic or Eastern Orthodox. Reformed theology arose out of the Reformation and thus is opposed to Catholic and Eastern Orthodox sacramental theology (like transubstantiation), veneration of saints and Mary, and works-based salvation.
2. It is not Arminian. Reformed theology stands in the Calvinism stream of Christianity and is very opposed to Arminian theology. To be reformed generally means to be Calvinistic. The terms are not precisely

equivalents, but in common usage they are often interchangeable. Here is a table that shows how different Calvinism is from Arminianism.

| 5 Points of Calvinism | 5 Points of Arminianism |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Total depravity | Human free will |
| Unconditional election | Conditional election |
| Limited atonement | Universal atonement |
| Irresistible grace | Resistible grace |
| Perseverance of the saints | Fall from grace |

3. It is not Dispensational. Reformed theology is not dispensational. Ask most reformed men if they are dispensational and they would say absolutely not, and in fact they strongly argue against dispensational belief.
4. It is not synonymous with Presbyterian or Protestant. There are many protestants who are not reformed in their theology; and there are non-Presbyterians who are also reformed, such as reformed Baptists.
5. It is not synonymous with the Reformation. If you are a Protestant or appreciate Reformation theology, this does not mean that you are “reformed.” We could say that you are at least “partly” reformed because you believe much like the early reformers in the doctrines of Scripture and salvation. But the term “reformed” means *more* than just a believer in the reformation doctrine of sola Scriptura (Scripture alone as our authority) or sola fide (salvation by faith alone).

What Reformed Is

R. C. Sproul is a well-known reformed pastor who defines reformed theology as “the theology of the Protestant Reformers and the heart of historical evangelicalism.” C. H. Spurgeon once said, “Reformed theology is nothing other than biblical Christianity” [1]. But it is actually a bit more involved than that.

Professor Byron Curtis, a professor at Geneva College gives a four-part definition of what it means to be reformed [2, 3]. I have adapted it below.

Note: It is the combination of these beliefs that makes one “reformed.”

The * next to doctrines below indicate my agreement. No star indicates my disagreement with that point.

- * 1. **Orthodox Doctrine**, doctrines “hammered out” in the first few centuries of church history. Ortho = right, dox = thinking.

- * A. Classic theism – omnipotence, omniscience, etc.
- * B. Trinitarian, one God, three externally existent persons.
- * C. Deity of Christ, hypostatic union, one mediator between God and man, incarnate, crucified, resurrected, ascended, second coming.
- * D. Humans in the image of God, fallen, need salvation.
- * E. Visible church.
- * F. Universal church.
- * G. Sacraments. We do not agree with Catholic belief that these minister grace. Rather they are symbolic expressions and memorials commanded by Christ and exemplified in the early church, namely baptism by immersion for believers, and Lord’s Table with symbolic elements.
- * H. Faith, hope, and love as foundations of the Christian life.

Most “Christians” believe these things, and in those quotation marks include Catholics and Eastern Orthodox adherents. Some professing Christians deny the Trinity (oneness Pentecostals) and others do not believe in the universal church (local-only ecclesiology).

* **2. Protestant Reformation Doctrine, the Five Solas.**

- * A. The authority of Scripture: sola scriptura (Scripture alone)
- * B. The basis of salvation: Sola Gratia (Grace alone)
- * C. The means of salvation: Sola Fide (Faith alone)
- * D. The merit of salvation: Solus Christus (Christ alone)
- * E. In everything: Soli Deo Gloria (Glory to God alone)

* **3. The Fundamentals** (could be considered part of #2 above).

- * A. The verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture
- * B. Virgin birth and deity of Christ
- * C. Substitutionary atonement of Christ
- * D. Bodily resurrection of Christ from the dead
- * E. One way of salvation by grace through faith
- * F. Second coming of Christ

Christian “Fundamentalists” believe both #2 and #3 but diverge as to their beliefs in the points below. “Evangelical Christians” believe the doctrines in sections #2 and #3, although some deny the complete inerrancy of Scripture and the bodily resurrection of Christ. They also diverge in their beliefs on the following points.

* **4. Calvinistic Doctrine**, particularly concerned with monergism, “the doctrines of grace,” and the sovereignty of God.

- * A. Total depravity: Ephesians 2:5, Romans 3:11, 8:6-8, John 6:44

- * B. Unconditional election: 2 Thess. 2:13, Acts 13:48, 18:10; evangelism is driven by this doctrine, but who is elect is God's business, not mine.
- C. Limited atonement (Christ died for world...his people...me)
- * D. Irresistible grace: John 6:37-40, Acts 16:14, Romans 8:30
- * E. Perseverance of the saints / Preservation of the saints: 1 John 5:13, Hebrews 3:14, 2 Corinthians 13:5; Ephesians 1:13-14, Philippians 1:6, John 5:24

Regarding (D) and (E), these are simply manifestations of the effective grace of God which, because of God's power, cannot be over-ruled and will come to expression in the life of the true believer.

Limited atonement or "particular redemption" states that Christ died only for the elect. This runs contrary to many Bible passages, including 1 John 2:2, 1 Timothy 2:6, 4:10, 2 Peter 3:9, John 3:16, 2 Peter 2:1, Hebrews 2:9, 10:29; see also Romans 8 about creation.

5. **Covenant Theology.** Most Reformed theologians hold to covenant theology. I do not agree with these doctrines at all.

- A. The church is the new Israel, God's promises to Israel are cancelled.
- B. Infant baptism (Acts 16:15, 33)
- C. Covenants of works, redemption, and grace
- D. Eschatology – generally amillennial or postmillennial, sometimes historic or covenant premillennial.

6. **Other issues**

A. **Regulative principle** of worship. Regarding how the Bible orders public worship in the church, this principle teaches that only those things that are instituted, appointed, or deduced from Scripture are permissible. Examples of things not generally acceptable are hymns written by men (psalms are preferred), musical instruments (at least those not found in the Bible are not used), and dancing in worship. The **normative principle** permits anything not particularly prohibited in Scripture. (We would be in between these two views.)

B. Denominations: Presbyterian, sovereign grace Baptists, Sovereign Grace Ministries (believer's baptism and charismatic), anything with "Reformed" in the name, an increasing number of Southern Baptist churches and schools, although there are still many Arminian southern Baptist churches and schools.

C. Generally close adherence to the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646, Church of England) or the 1689 Second London Baptist Confession. Many parts of these confessions are excellent, but we cannot agree in every detail, nor do we resort to quoting the “Westminster standards” in writing or preaching as if they have a near-Scriptural level of authority.

How Should We Treat Reformed Christians?

1. I believe that a person can be a true Christian and yet believe in limited atonement and covenant theology, which were the two main points that lacked the star (*) of approval above.
2. As such, we can be thankful that these people are our brothers and sisters in Christ, because they hold so much doctrine in common with us.
3. We can further be thankful that, though mixed with some doctrinal error, they generally preach the gospel. This attitude is from Philippians 1:18.
4. I appreciate the generally high view of God held by those in Reformed circles. They take God’s glory and sovereignty seriously in all areas of life and theology.
5. If opportunity arises, we can show our Reformed brothers why the differences in our beliefs are important and why they should change.
6. Close cooperative ministry in a church would be very difficult. The baptism of infants, teaching on Israel and eschatology, and even some questions about worship would be points of difference that would be difficult to overcome. Someone would have to be willing to swallow a lot of different teaching, or the church would have to be able to tolerate the teaching of a wide variety of doctrinal positions which could be confusing to the members. That kind of arrangement is a recipe for problems and therefore is unwise. Beyond that, the some of teachings mentioned above are *wrong* when compared with Scripture and we should strive to not have any *wrong* teaching in our midst.

Conclusion

I adhere to orthodox Protestantism in terms of #1 and #2 as well as fundamentalism (#3). I consider myself largely in agreement with reformed theology in the area of Scripture and soteriology (#4). I do not accept Covenant Theology at all (#5) and only some portions of #6, so I am not reformed by the common use of that term. How about you?

MAP

Bibliography

[1] http://www.ligonier.org/learn/series/what_is_reformed_theology/

[2] http://www.fivesolas.com/ref_defn.htm

[3] <http://www.challies.com/theology/what-it-means-to-be-reformed>

[4] John Frame, http://www.thirdmill.org/files/reformedperspectives/hall_of_frame/ST1_Introduction%20to%20the%20Reformed%20Faith.pdf

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Labels (work in progress)

Some have eschewed the use of labels to summarize people or churches or doctrinal positions. I still find them helpful as ways to summarize what people believe. We must use labels carefully because just about every possible combination of beliefs exists, therefore making labeling difficult.

1. Catholic: believe the historical orthodox doctrines but not reformation doctrines, not all fundamentals, not Calvinism.
2. Evangelical: believe historical orthodox doctrines, Reformation doctrines, most fundamentals; some believe Calvinism, others Arminianism, some believe Covenant theology and others dispensational theology.
3. Fundamental: like evangelical but believe all fundamentals.
4. Dispensational: like fundamental but do not believe Covenant theology.
5. Pentecostal/charismatic: like fundamental but mostly Arminian. Some are dispensational. Surprisingly, some are Catholics, and some are Reformed.

Some names you might run into in the bookstore or on websites:

1. John MacArthur: Reformed but Dispensational Baptist, cessationist
2. John Piper: Reformed Covenant Baptist, open to charismatic gifts
3. Mark Dever: Reformed Covenant Baptist
4. R. C. Sproul: Reformed Covenant Presbyterian
5. Tim Keller: Reformed Covenant Presbyterian

The above differ as to egalitarian or complementarian views. They differ widely in terms of acceptable worship music, from conservative hymnology to contemporary to Christian rap.