

What We Teach

Reformed Church of Box Hill

This has been the hallmark and banner under which truly Reformed churches have worked throughout history and more particularly since the Reformation of the seventeenth century. However, what do we actually understand by it?

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A Matter of Taste

For almost five centuries now, Reformed Churches all around the world, and Reformed men and women have had a clear understanding of why they were Reformed. They have understood what the distinctive's are that caused and causes them still today to remain clearly Reformed. Being Reformed, for the serious and genuine, has never been as some would claim, a mere matter of taste. People have lived by choice in extreme conditions of hardship and have been willing to die and indeed have been put to death because they believed in principles that their consciences before God would not allow them to forsake. Those very principles showed they were Reformed. There is nothing obscure or hidden about being Reformed.

Concerning Change

Some, by claiming the principle of Reformed and always reforming, try to use it against those who resist their efforts at introducing change without following the established and time-honoured procedures to protect unity and harmony in the churches. From them we gain the impression that a perpetual reforming process is measured by the degree of change in practice we experience.

For other people the stress falls on ReformED, meaning stable, changeless, and any change at all is regarded with high suspicion and viewed as the decline of the church.

Of course, both these views leave much to be desired and we would hope they belong to the minority among us, yet they are sufficiently vocal as to create tensions that threaten unity.

In search of Truth

Another view that has much greater merit, but still falls well short of a complete picture is that which regards being Reformed as always looking for and discovering new truth. Such a view, without anything more being added to it, or an over emphasis on such a view leaves a person open and welcoming to all that appears new. As such, questions as are exercising many denominations at present on women in office, or the great flood of emphasis on psychology and counseling, for example, raise concepts that may not have been heard before, and may even appear to have a Biblical basis to them. A desire to be involved in the discovery of new truth has led some to more readily adopt that which is new, without a clear basis for assessing such things, but simply because it is new.

To be willing and active in searching out truth is certainly very important, but it is a particular approach, as we shall see, that keeps one Reformed. Truth is that which has its origin in God no matter what it is. In the process of exploring and searching out truth it may happen that we discover what which we believe is new. For the Reformed student this will always only be because the doctrines and articles, or truths of faith, have been traced back too or deduced from that which God has presented to us in His revelation. God's revelation of Himself and the gospel of salvation in the Son Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit, and all that surrounds them in the revealed and written Word of God determines and provides Reformed thinkers with that which determines and moulds all else. I have no wish to suggest that we have exhausted the possibility of the discovery of new truth, but it would seem more humble

to say that our search and desire are more in terms of deepening and adding to that which we know now as the truth.

Let us be quite clear about this. Being Reformed is something we can state in clear and unmistakable propositions. There is nothing indefinable about it, nor is there anything mystical about it. There is nothing hidden about it. Nor is it to be considered something that is doubtful or full of shadows that shift and change with time and circumstances. Reformed faith is clear, definite, easily presented and only open to change when the weight of Biblical evidence demands it. On those occasions where we are presented with seemingly insoluble problems or questions, the Reformed Christian lays the matter in God's hand, and does not seek to formulate a solution that introduces doubt or hidden agendas or meanings. We shall always consciously seek to remain children who are bowed in humility before the Word of

God, and seek therefore to bring every thought and act into captive obedience to Christ. When we find we cannot explain something, we shall retreat deeper into the shadow of our Lord (2Cor 10:5).

1. Reformed

Reformed can be presented in a series of propositions, which are mutually dependant upon each other and interrelated. In the items presented below, we are only able to extract several high features and fundamental points of Reformational thinking.

a. Scriptures Alone

The first point of consideration, we have already been dealing with in the above, but it is well for us to be absolutely clear in this, the most fundamental of all that goes to stating and defining what it is to be Reformed. All that we are and stand upon is based on clear Biblical principles that can be demonstrated from Scripture. Above all else, the sole authority for the regulating of life and doctrine is the Word of God. From His Word we extract every principle by which we live, think and act. Because Reformed conviction holds God's Word in the supreme position of authority on this earth, and we live in a world that always seeks to supplant the authority of God with another, we are always alert to any influence or pressure to conform to that which comes from any other source that seeks to intrude into our attitudes, thinking and living. There is nothing on this earth that stands above the authority of God's Word, the Scriptures.

Reformed conviction is a view of life, living and all of creation, that is dominated and conditioned by that which is revealed in Scripture. Before all else, Christianity is a revealed faith. It is not something that can be discovered by the exercise of human intellect, intuition or anything else. Neither is Christianity an invention of human imagination. No-one can come to know God, except God reveal Himself to them (Jn 6:65;14:6). The Christian faith then, is something that must be shown by God in the active intervention of the Holy Spirit through the Word, in the life of a person. This is necessary because in ourselves without God, the human race is blind and dead in sin and the Word of God remains an interesting but closed book. For new life to be granted, and blindness to be lifted, and the total disabling effects of sin to be removed, the power of God is required. Only then does the light of the Word of God illuminate the soul. When He exercises His power, He makes, "His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6), and the light of the knowledge of God is poured out into our souls.

b. God Absolutely Sovereign

Because the Reformed faith has such a high view of God's Word, our view of God Himself takes on crucial significance, and this leads us to a second consideration. God is absolutely sovereign. He is infinitely elevated above the highest creature, the Most High, Lord of heaven and earth, subject to none, influenced by none, and absolutely independent. None can thwart Him or hinder Him. He sits upon the throne of the universe directing all things "in conformity with the purpose of His will" (Eph 1:11). His will is supreme, and whatever He does is therefore right. It was sovereign will that appointed Christ to His salvation work, sovereign love that sent Him and sovereign authority that assigned Him to His work.

The sovereignty of God means all that exists and happens, does so because He willed it. God is God!

D.M. Lloyd-Jones provides us with some helpful headlines to understand why the doctrine of the sovereignty of God is so important. There is in the first place, he says, no answer to the problem of history, and no explanation of the state of world affairs apart from the sovereignty of God. Secondly, this doctrine is necessary for the church. Thirdly, it is necessary for the true living of the Christian life, and finally, all other doctrine derives from this (pg 239 'The Fight of Faith' Iain H. Murray). Let me expand these headings briefly.

i. God's Sovereignty Explains History and the State of the World

For the Reformed faith, the doctrine of the sovereignty of God is of such paramount importance that, without it there can be no explanation or answer to the problem of history, and no explanation of the state of the world as it is today, being essentially no different from what it was when Adam fell into sin. That humanity has not self destructed and annihilated all life upon this earth long ago can only be understood in terms of God exercising His sovereign power. No matter what we may be told to the contrary, there is a Divine goal and purpose to creation. It is only as we accept and see the absolute power of God at work that we are also able to see that the singular function of creation is to bring glory to its creator and redeemer. Let it also be understood that while upholding the absolute sovereignty of God, we also fully uphold human responsibility. God's sovereignty in no way diminishes human responsibility.

ii. God's Sovereignty is essential for the health and well-being of the Church

Secondly, God alone sovereign, is essential to the Church. Only as the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ contemplates and worships the Almighty Lord God of heaven and earth, are the people of God spared from the disease of pessimism. "All things", and this in its absolute sense, "work together for the good of those who love Him", because He is in complete control of all things with absolute power, wisdom and knowledge. What He begins, He completes. Those He calls with electing grace, he also ushers into the eternal courts of His heavenly palace. All that He promises, He has and shall fulfil in complete faithfulness.

For a lack of this truth, many Christians sinfully fall into depression as they talk about and consider all the dangers and troubles of this age.

iii. God's sovereignty reveals the true wonder of the cross

Thirdly, it is only as we understand and confess with all our being the sovereignty of God that we are able to view the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ in a truly Biblical light. Our Lord and Saviour did not, as so many seem to believe, come to grant happiness and the privilege of certain wonderful experiences. He came first and foremost to give Himself in sacrificial love to pay the horrific penalty of God upon our sin, so that His people are therefore and thereby set in a right relationship to God.

iv. God's Sovereignty is the basis for all doctrine

Fourthly, it is no exaggeration or over simplification to point out that all other doctrines flow from this doctrine of the absolute authority, power and majesty of God. Unless the sovereignty of God is the foundation of all Reformed Theology, all will be wrong and disordered. If this is not right or not understood, then neither will the doctrines of justification, sanctification and glorification be understood correctly either.

c. The Passing of Time

A third consideration of what constitutes Reformed thinking concerns history and a particular view of the passage of time. History is not an endless, aimless passing of time. Nor is it something that is conditioned by the cycle of the rising, shining and setting of the sun, or the yearly cycle and repetition of the four seasons. Hendrikus Berkhof describes the Christian view of history as, "...a stream moving toward a specific point. We see it not as a sea without shore or form, but as dammed up, streaming to a known or presumed goal " (pg 17 "Christ the Meaning of History"). The Reformed understanding of history is that creation is moving towards a particular goal, and there are two particularly important and indispensable aspects that form the Reformed view, the covenant of God with His people, and what we call the history of redemption, both of which reveal the goal of the movement of time.

Reformed distinctiveness is not only due to doctrine, but is also due to the emphasis we place on certain doctrines. Many Christians will agree in principle with much of what we have said so far, but will hesitate to give them the same primacy and strength. We are dealing with matters that distinguish the Reformed from all other thinking. We are different, and clearly different to the Arminian and the Roman Catholic, and we are attempting to show why that is so here.

i. The Covenant

In his approach to the Covenant, the Reformed Christian stands apart again. Because we believe that God is a Covenant God, and since the Covenant lies beneath all God's relations with us, it is crucial to our understanding of God's dealings with creation and His people in particular. The Covenant, or to be more precise, the Covenant of grace is an act of God that arises from within Divine Sovereignty. It is God's Covenant. He establishes it. He imposes obligations on us as a result of dispensing His sovereign grace.

Looking back into history, the essence of the Covenant is already visible in Genesis 3:15 with the very first announcement of the gospel of Christ Jesus, but isn't fully declared until Abraham (Gen 12:1-3; 17:1-14). From being made with Abraham and his children at first, its richness was later extended to all Israel and came to include all believers and their children.

God's purpose in the Covenant was to establish a relationship with sinful humanity on the basis of His love and mercy. God entered into a relationship with a people who have been sovereignly chosen in love to be rescued from sin and adopted into His holy family. To them, since Abraham, He said, "I will be your God, and you shall be My people" (Gen 17; Jer 30:22).

In the Old Testament the ultimate focus and reference of the Covenant was the Messiah, how He would bear the sin of the world, make intercession for the transgressors (Is 53:12) and restore forever the people of God into the full blessing and fellowship of a holy and righteous relationship with the Lord. Throughout the Old Testament there are repeated calls to return to the Lord, to rend the heart and repent. "Come all you who are thirsty...and you who have no money ...I will make an everlasting

covenant with you, my unfailing kindnesses promised to David" (Is 55:1,3), is the Lord's earnest call to all, that all may come into a relationship with Him through the promised Messiah.

That same call is repeated throughout the New Testament as God's Word goes before man through time pointing the way to the Lord Jesus Christ who came, who is, and whose work is the basis of the final fulfillment of God's relationship with humanity. When Christ returns upon the clouds of the air in the second coming, only then will the full scope and glory of the covenant be visible as the Kingdom of God is established forever. Then the Lord God shall say, in words that provide a strong reminder of the covenant, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God" (Rev 21:3).

ii. Salvation History

As you can see in this brief overview, time and history are important to a covenant understanding as it progressively opens us to a relationship of forgiveness and restoration by the Lord Jesus. It is because we enabled to see and understand our Lord act with redemptive grace in time and history that we also speak more particularly of the history of redemption.

The two greatest acts of redemption our Lord performed and that figure most prominently in the Scriptures, are the rescue of the people of Israel from slavery, their progress and eventual entry into the promised land, and the incarnation of the Son of Almighty God as a man and His life, death and resurrection to rescue sinners from the slavery of sin to bring them into the land of covenant promise.

There remains one final act of saving grace to be performed. It shall come according to the promise of God at the consummation of time, when Christ shall return, and is the goal towards which all of time is moving, which as Reformed people we confess.

d. Man, Sin and Salvation

We have one further consideration. Again, it is a matter of extreme importance in coming to terms with what it means to be Reformed, and concerns the Biblical Reformed view of man and his rescue from sin.

At the end of each day of creation, God reviewed His work, and with a sigh of satisfaction and pleasure, saw that it was good. In fact, the record of scripture is, that "God saw that it was very good" (Gen 1:31). Everything truly was good until sin entered the world, and the horrifying thing about its entry is that it came by human rebellion, and sinful humanity has been and remains the cause of all the ills of this world.

The Reformed understanding of the teaching of scripture leads us to say that sin had such an effect on our being of humanity that it is impossible for anyone to exert sufficient will-power, intellectual, spiritual or physical power to come into a relationship with the holy Lord God Almighty. Sin has caused a gulf of separation between us and God, and to cross this gulf is beyond us. In the terms of theology we call this total depravity. Mankind is helpless in securing God's favour by an exercise of their own righteousness. Even what good there is within the human race, and there is good, has been affected so that it can no longer properly be called good.

The scriptures declare that "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Is 64:6) that "there is no one righteous, not even one, there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one" (Rom 3:10-

12). Before God we are regarded as "dead in transgression and sins...by nature objects of wrath" (Eph 2:1,3).

Except for the exercise of divine sovereignty and His electing grace upon the human soul, there is nothing to look forward to but doom and darkness, "but thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 15:57). Through the publishing abroad of the Word of God, under the active intervention and enlivening work of the Holy Spirit, people are brought into a saving knowledge in the Lord Jesus Christ and the work of salvation he completed in His life, death, resurrection and ascension into heaven. The work of the Holy

Of necessity we are being very brief. Each point we present is a subject all by itself and are the delight of all God's people to trace out and explore in ever greater depth. Never-the-less, the stress of the Biblical Reformed view of salvation is such that we see the central focus of Christianity as the grace of God, given to sinful human beings through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the gospel, and in order to present it clearly, the hopeless condition of sinful humanity must also be explained. The utter helplessness of humanity to find or achieve salvation convinces us there is nothing in us that merits or deserves God's favour, or makes a person worthy of God's fatherly care, "for we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (Rom 3:28), and "it is by grace you have been saved through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God ...created in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:8,9).

In summary to all that we have said, the Reformed position is never satisfied with approaching God and His world in a piece meal fashion. The desire and goal of the Reformed attitude is always to take in the whole of the counsel of God and to see things in the larger perspective of the chief function and purpose of man, to glorify the sovereign Lord and to enjoy Him forever.

2. Always Reforming

If what we have said above constitutes something of the fundamentals of being Reformed, what does it mean to be always Reforming?

Conservative or Orthodox

It is important we make a clear distinction at this point concerning conservative and orthodox. Often labels are caste around to classify the position of various people. We are in this paper speaking of the label Reformed, and are trying to contribute to a better understanding of it so that it can be used in a constructive and positive manner. However, labels can also be used without really understanding what they mean. When that is done, an inaccurate or false picture is presented both to ourselves and to other people. One such label is that of conservative. From time to time it is applied in a way that suggests being conservative is being backward, tradition bound, slow to move and perhaps insular in attitude.

The true conservative may however, be quite progressive and innovative, but seeks to be careful about the things he says and does. He tries to test for possible consequences before rushing in a particular direction. This paper is not seeking to advocate false conservatism, but is instead seeking to promote and encourage orthodoxy. Strong belief in the historic confessions to which our churches adhere (the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dordt, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Belgic

Confession of Faith) is the test of orthodoxy, and perhaps it would be much more constructive and challenging to highlight orthodoxy among ourselves than to highlight conservatism.

Always Reforming does not mean change in orthodoxy, but it does mean a firm hold upon the fixed datum points of the sufficiency, inerrancy and infallibility of the Word of God, the fall of man into sin and his utter helplessness there, the absolute sovereignty of God, the Trinity, the person of Christ as God and man, the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation and His taking upon Himself in our place the punishment due our sin, the activity and work of the Holy Spirit in creating faith and His residence in the hearts of God's people, and the return or second and final coming of Christ in the great day of the Lord. Orthodoxy will not allow anything to tamper with these doctrines, or in any way allow anything to threaten these fixed and absolutely fundamental points of faith.

Faithfulness and Love

Perhaps an illustration would help here. The church in Ephesus in Revelation 2 (vss 2-7) is what we might call a solid Reformed church. She shows all the features and strengths of being Reformed. She is fruitful in good deeds. She is a hard worker in kingdom work, and in the face of the difficulties of living in a sinful world shows clear perseverance. Faithfulness also characterises her attitude. In the treatment of things evil, she shows abhorrence, and she tests all her leaders for sound doctrine rejecting those who are found to be false, she does not grow weary in all this.

In many respects, these are the very marks we seek to promote and maintain as characteristics of our churches. That should not be surprising because it is what the Bible teaches us, and yet, despite these Biblical strengths, for some there is something missing. A number of those who sense this, are being tempted by activities and attitudes that seek to manufacture a degree of excitement by the use of christianised pop-psychology or church growth techniques that are driven by pragmatism.

The Lord, while praising the church in Ephesus for her strength, also held a grievance against her. There was something missing from among her people. His question and grief toward them concerned their focus, and He called upon them to repent and turn back. Where was the fire of their first love? Where was the passion and heat of their desire toward Him? It had obviously once been there, but was now gone.

It is this which the 'always Reforming' aspect of being Reformed encompasses. It is a perpetual refocusing of attention on the Lord our God whom we worship. Our Lord's constant complaint against His Old Testament people was their sin of turning away from Him. It wasn't always that they deliberately and consciously rebelled against Him, but more often than not it was forgetting how He had worked the mighty acts of His saving grace toward them, rescuing them from the great flood, from slavery in Egypt, from captivity and exile in Babylon and many more, and so their love, awe and joy in the Lord waned and grew cold.

Always reforming is that for which the Lord praises the church in Ephesus, while also however, maintaining a concentrated focus on the Lord God. As we seek by constant application of what the Lord speaks to us through His Word, under the guidance of the Spirit, the use of the God-given means of grace, the preaching of the Word, the sacraments and prayer, we are always to bring personal and church life into conformity with the fixed confessional doctrines as we noted them above, being sure that as we do so, we remain firmly God-centred.

Something that is easily forgotten and little recognised, is that the trend of sinful people is inexorably down and away from God. The great struggle of life this side of glory is always to be reforming. The

Apostle Paul reminds us, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:11), and then goes on to call us to protect and arm ourselves with the Word of God.

For a religion that brings glory to the One true and only God to be brought to life in all our hearts, there must be both knowledge and passion, doctrine and love. To be sound in doctrine as it affects the intellect, true in experience dealing with the emotions, and living a holy life that conditions our outward visible practice of everyday life, requires a willingness and attitude that is always reforming or refocusing, and as such is a heeding of the call that sounds throughout Scripture, "Come let us return to the Lord...Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge Him" (Hosea 6:1,3).

A return to genuine Reformed thinking and attitudes will preserve us and our churches from ignorance - which is a lack of knowledge. It will also preserve us from intellectualism - which is all knowledge but no love. Genuine Reformed thinking will protect us from mysticism - which is magic and superstition, and will prevent emotionalism - which is all emotion and no knowledge. Let us keep God, His glory and our enjoyment of Him first.