

LESSON 2:

Rediscovering Redeeming Love

What Is Reformed Theology?

Getting Started

The term Reformed theology (or *Calvinism* as it is often called) refers to the theological tradition associated with two movements that came out of the Protestant Reformation: The French-Swiss Reformation in Geneva, led by John Calvin (1509-1564), and the German-Swiss Reformation, born under the ministry of Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and matured under Heinrich Bullinger (1504-75). Calvin was a contemporary of Luther's and their theologies did not differ substantially. Luther's, however, was more aligned with the state and there were differences concerning the sacraments. Dr. James Sawyer, in his book, *The Survivor's Guide to Theology*, says: "Luther's approach to reform was to purge the church of anything Scripture forbids, while the Swiss Reformers wanted to purge the church of everything Scripture does not warrant. Everything in the practice of the church required biblical warrant."

John Calvin, who was born in France, emerged out of Geneva, Switzerland, as *the* greatest theologian of the era. He wrote a definitive work of Reformed Theology, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536) and numerous commentaries. More than any other person, he shaped Reformed Theology. (See Chart 3, *Reformation Time Line (1516-1563)*, for highlights of John Calvin's life.)

Reformers like Calvin were committed to the inductive study of the original biblical texts. Calvin, and many others like him, went back to the works of Augustine in the fourth century to restudy what the church father had said and how it would differ from what had been the Catholic interpretation of his works. There were three reasons the reformers chose the works of Augustine over medieval scholars:

- His Latin style was more appealing than the vulgar medieval ecclesiastical Latin.
- He wrote in simple theological terms.
- He wrote and lived so close to New Testament times.

To understand Reformed Theology as a system, we must begin with the major emphasis of Calvin. We will not go into detail on these here, because we will be taking a look at them throughout the study.

- Doctrine of God
- Doctrine of the Word of God
- Doctrine of Christ and the Holy Spirit
- Doctrine of Man
- Doctrine of Salvation

The term **Reformed**, with reference to the distinctive Swiss theology, arose from the observation of Queen Elizabeth I of England, who commented on the more radical tone of these non-Lutheran Protestants, referring to them as 'more reformed' and thus labeling this movement as the **Reformed** wing of Protestantism.

—James Sawyer,
**The Survivor's
Guide to Theology**

Most professing Christians don't know what they believe, and so can neither understand nor defend the Christian faith—much less live it. Many of the things we tell nonbelievers do not represent real Christianity. And most nonbelievers draw their impressions of the Christian faith from the stereotypes and caricatures that popular culture produces.

— Charles Colson,
The Faith

- Doctrine of the Church, including the Sacraments

When you look at the doctrines Calvin emphasized, it is easy to see that they are some of the very doctrines that were so mishandled and not scripturally based during the Dark Ages.

Calvin died in 1564, and his followers carried on what he had begun. Theodore Beza (1519-1605) was one of these followers. Whereas Calvin had followed a more inductive and experience-based method, Beza applied more of a deductive, logical, detailed method which characterized the thought of the day. The theology now focused more on systematization and was more methodical in nature. In so doing, perhaps some of the intimate relationship of theology to life was again obscured. While Beza held closely to Calvin's theology, he put more emphasis on predestination and developed the doctrine of limited atonement in detail. Another of Calvin's followers, Francis Turretin (1623-87), wrote a three-volume work, *Theological Institutions*, which became the most important work since Calvin's *Institutes*.

Reformed Theology spread in Europe. In 1643, in England, the Parliament ordered a confession of faith to be written. The task was undertaken by 121 clergymen and 30 members of Parliament. It took them two years to come up with the Westminster Confession, which was completed in 1647. (See Chart 4, *Post-Reformation Time Line*.) Reformed Theology also came to America through the Puritans. Princeton Seminary became the center of Reformed Theology in America. Archibald Alexander (1772-1851), the founding professor of the seminary used Turretin's *Theological Institutions* as his model for theology. His successor, Charles Hodge, continued to use the same source until the publication of his own systematic theology in 1872. Princetonian theologians attempted to preserve the legacy of orthodoxy they had received from the Confession, with the associated Longer and Shorter Catechisms. It became the standard confessional statements in the English-speaking world. The Westminster Confession of Faith has become one of the hallmarks of Reformed Theology.

The thoughts for this week are:

Reformed Theology is *Systematic*.

Reformed Theology is *Catholic*.

Reformed Theology is *Evangelical*.

Reformed Theology is Systematic

Every written document has a structure or format by which it is organized—sentences, paragraphs, chapters all have themes. Every theology also has a *system* by which it is structured. This is what is meant by *systematic theology*. Systematic theology attempts to understand doctrine in a coherent and unified manner.

Reformed Theology is a systematic theology.

Systematic theology also asks the question: “What does the *whole* Bible teach about this topic?” This means systematic theology involves collecting and understanding all the relevant passages in the Bible on various topics and then summarizing their teachings clearly so that we know what to believe about each topic. One cannot simply base a theology on one Scripture reference alone, but must take into consideration what the *entire* Bible has to say on the subject.

Reformed Theology doesn’t set out with a philosophy and try to use Scripture to prove it. That is a common error in today’s world. Instead, Reformed Theology searches for the interrelatedness of all Scripture. It asks: What *system* is presented by Scripture itself? And, if God is speaking to us through Scripture, what is His *theme*?

If a theology is systematic, then every doctrine in some way touches every other doctrine. God is the *theme* of Reformed Theology. That means that Reformed Theology applies the doctrine of God relentlessly to all other doctrines, which makes it the controlling factor in the belief system. Therefore, it is absolutely essential that we have a full understanding of God and His characteristics if we are to understand Reformed doctrine.

During the course of the Dark Ages, the doctrine of God became perverted. God was no longer a God of love; He was a God to be feared. Another characteristic of God that became blurred was His sovereignty or His control over man and the rest of His creation. Remember, they believed God was not in control of man’s salvation, the church was—and the works of the individual were emphasized as part of the process of achieving it. Once one understands what the sovereignty of God really means, then every other doctrine will be affected by it. That is how *systematic* theology works!

1. (a) Why do you believe it is important to study a topic or doctrine in a *systematic* way—that is taking into consideration what the entire Bible has to say about that subject?

- (b) Have you ever seen people come to false conclusions when they don’t study *systematically*?

Explain. _____

2. Read the following Scriptures and describe what it says God has control over.

a. Daniel 4:35 _____

b. Deuteronomy 32:39 _____

God is the center, ruling in sovereign might. The true Calvinist has seen this, and thus keeps God at the center of everything he does. God is the center of his worship, for in true worship attention is drawn away from earthly things and reverently fixed upon God and his glory. God is also the center of the true Calvinist’s thinking.

–Phillip Graham Ryken,
What is a True Calvinist?

c. Isaiah 45:5-7 _____

d. Proverbs 2:1 _____

e. Ephesians 1:1 _____

3. Has there been a life-altering experience in your life when you realized, perhaps for the first time, that you were *not in* control of your circumstances? If so, briefly describe it.

4. (a) Do you believe the following is a true statement? “The better a person knows God, the more willing he is to let God be in control.? Why or why not?

(b) What are some things you have been attempting to control in your life or the lives of others that only God can control?

(c) As people watch you go about your daily activities, how well would they surmise that you know God—simply by watching how much you insist being in control of all your circumstances? Explain.

- Every theology has a *system* around which it is organized.
- *Systematic* theology is gathering what the whole Bible says about a doctrine.
- The theme around which Reformed Theology is organized is the sovereignty of God.

Truth for Today: *All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: What have you done?* Daniel 4:35

Reformed Theology is Catholic

The word *catholic* comes from the Latin and from the Greek, and in both cases means *universal*. Before the time of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church was the *universal* church. It encompassed all Christian people of the day, and was united universally under Rome. At the time of the Reformation, there were those who were less than enthusiastic about what the church, under the leadership of the pope, was doing; so they seceded. They became *Protestants* because they *protested* what was happening in the Catholic Church, which was the *only* church at the time. They sometimes called themselves Anglo Catholics because they no longer wanted to identify with the Roman Catholics. The word *catholic* though, in its original meaning, had nothing to do with either Roman or Anglo.

The Reformers of the sixteenth century did not *protest* everything that had been set down by the church in previous centuries. They rejected church tradition as divine revelation, but clung tightly to doctrinal principles of the early church fathers, particularly Augustine. They also embraced the doctrinal decisions made by the councils of Nicea (325) and Chalcedon (451) on the Trinity and the Person of Christ. The Reformers took church history seriously and, as they reviewed it in light of Scripture, they kept the doctrine they saw as scriptural and threw out the rest.

Every generation is in danger of letting tradition replace truth and, therefore, must review their doctrinal beliefs so as not to pass down false beliefs to the next generation. It is important to remember that everyone who makes up the true *universal or catholic* church today does not necessarily adhere to all the doctrines of Reformed Theology. It has often been said that churches don't teach doctrine because doctrine divides. We may not agree on every point, but we must remember that we are still a part of a universal church which is the Body of Christ in the world today.

As *The Apostle's Creed* states: "(We) believe in the holy catholic church."

The reformers like to refer to the church, as a whole, as the *invisible* church. In its true spiritual reality, as the fellowship of all genuine believers of all ages, the church is *invisible*. This is because we cannot see the spiritual condition of people's hearts. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin were eager to affirm this invisible aspect of the church, because the Roman Catholic Church stated the *visible* organization of the Roman Catholic Church was the only true church. Protestants refer to the *visible* church as the local church body.

1. (a) Read Ephesians 3:20-21. What is the purpose of the universal church in the world today?

- (b) There is the universal church and then there are the local church bodies. Read Ephesians 4:14-16. Name some things your local church body should be doing if it is to serve its purpose in the world.

*In our creeds we confess our belief in one holy, catholic, apostolic church. What does that mean? The church is **one** because all true Christians, while we participate in different confessing congregations, are part of one body. That body is **holy** because its essential nature is found in Christ. The church is **catholic** because it is universal, which is what **catholic** means—the church is open to everyone. Finally, the church is **apostolic**, which means that its teachings are those of the apostles. We have not invented a religion. We are part of the faith God revealed.*

—Charles Colson,
The Faith

2. What is likely to happen to a church or denomination that gives up learning *systematic* theology for a generation or longer? Has this been true of your church?

3. What are some traditions that you believe take the place of true doctrine in churches?

4. When you think of the church as the *invisible* fellowship of all true believers throughout all time, how does it affect the way you think of yourself as an individual Christian?

- The word *catholic* means *universal*.
- If systematic theology is not taught, every generation of the church is in danger of allowing tradition and heresy to replace truth.
- The invisible church is made up of all genuine believers of all time.

Truth for Today: *This intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. Ephesians 3:10*

Reformed Theology is Evangelical

What does *evangelical* mean? Most Christians do not understand the word in the *classic* sense. The biblical word for Gospel is *evangel*. Brent Cunningham defines the word this way: “The term *evangelical* first came to fame during the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s. It was used almost synonymously with the word ‘*Protestant*.’ In fact, even today in places like Germany, you’ll hear evangelical being used as another word for Protestant. The biblical word for gospel is *evangel*, and because the reformers saw what they were doing as being closer to the biblical gospel, they called themselves *evangelicals*.” Evangelicals are those who use Scripture, and Scripture alone, on which to base their beliefs.

The reformers used the term *evangelical* to describe their conviction on two hallmarks of their movement:

- Authority comes from Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*) This was the Reformation’s *formal* cause. This meant they opposed anything the Catholic Church claimed as policy that was not scripturally based.
- Justification comes by faith alone (*sola fide*). This is said to be the Reformation’s *material* cause because it is central to the Gospel. The Catholic Church was claiming that certain works and traditions must be kept in order to be in right standing with God.

There is common ground among all Protestants (or *evangelicals*) because they base their common beliefs on Scripture alone, and believe that it is by faith alone (and no works) that God accepts us. Because all Protestants are *evangelical* and grounded in Scripture alone, we all share the following doctrinal beliefs:

- The Bible is the divinely inspired word of God, without error in the original writing and the only infallible rule of faith and practice.
- God is a Person, infinitely wise, just, good, true, and powerful who made the world out of nothing.
- Man, made in the image of God, willfully disobeyed God’s commands and thereby became worthy of death.
- Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, became man. He was literally born of a virgin. He worked miracles. He fulfilled prophecy. He suffered and died for our sin. He was raised physically from the dead. He will come again literally to gather his people and to judge the world.
- The Holy Spirit, who is equal in power, glory, and honor to God the Father and God the Son, proceeds from the Father and the Son to call and regenerate believers.
- Salvation from sin comes to us not by our good works, but by receiving the free gift of God by faith. Saving faith receives the sacrifice of Christ as *our* sacrifice, as our only basis for fellowship with God. Such saving faith inevitably motivates us to obedience.
- Prayer is a genuine conversation with our Creator and Redeemer. In prayer we praise God, give thanks, ask forgiveness, and make requests which bring concrete changes in the world.

*We call the core beliefs that have united Christians through the ages **orthodoxy**, or ‘right belief.’*

–Charles Colson,
The Faith

Or.tho.doxy...

1: that which adheres to the accepted or traditional and established faith, especially in religion; proper, correct, or conventional;
2: that which adheres or conforms to the Christian faith as expressed in the early Christian ecumenical creeds and confessions.

–Charles Colson,
The Faith

The word **evangelical** is derived from the Greek word **euangelion** which means gospel. The word came into fame during the time of the Protestant Reformation. The reformers saw what they were doing as being closer to the biblical gospel so they called themselves **evangelicals**.

- The term church is used to refer to both the corporate body of Christ, composed of all who through personal faith in Christ as Savior and Lord have been born again, and also to the locally organized group of believers.

1. Examine Chart 5, *Denominations that Arose From the Reformation*. These are just some of the denominations that sprung from the Reformation. Which, if any of these, does your background include? Do you believe that there will be representatives from all of these groups in Heaven?

Why or why not?

2. Do you believe there is any harm done when evangelical Christians continue to give the impression that they think *liberal* Protestant churches, who do not adhere to the basic doctrinal truths above, are true Christian churches? Explain the reasons for your answer.

3. (a) What are some doctrinal issues, not included in the basic list above, that you believe can divide believers within the *invisible* evangelical church?

- (b) Read I Peter 2:17, Gal. 6:10, and I John 4:19-20. What do these passages say about unity among the Church of Jesus Christ?

- Evangelicals are those who use Scripture, and Scripture alone, on which to base their beliefs.
- *All* Protestants adhere to some basic doctrinal beliefs regardless of denomination.
- God's Word demands that all believers live in unity and love.

Truth for Today: *I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.* 1 Corinthians 1:10