

GOSPEL HIGHWAY

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WHO ARE THE REFORMED BAPTISTS?

by B. S. Poh

HISTORY

After the time of the apostles, churches continued to multiply everywhere. As the years passed, many churches began to depart from the teachings of the Bible. Superstition and human traditions were propagated as truth. Wars were waged in the name of Christianity. Immorality, idolatry and corruption were rampant in the so-called Christian world. The true Christians were a persecuted minority.

In the 16th century, God brought about a mighty stirring in Europe, causing many people to seek Him and hunger after the truth. This is now called the Reformation. Despite the attempts of the older churches to counter this movement, new churches were founded right through to the 17th century.

In England, the Particular Baptist churches arose in the first half of the 17th century. They were known as *Baptists* because, unlike the other reformed churches, they held to the baptism of believers by immersion. They were known as *Particular* Baptists because, unlike the General Baptists, they held to the doctrine of “particular redemption”, i.e. the belief that Christ died specifically for the elect

The Particular Baptist churches grew in number quickly in Britain and America, until they were affected by hyper-Calvinism in the 18th century. Hyper-Calvinism distorts the doctrine of the sovereignty of God by denying that it is right to call upon sinners to repent and believe in Christ

From the 19th century, all evangelical churches were weakened by the rise of modernism. The Particular Baptists were not spared. Modernism (or liberalism) deny the supernatural and miraculous of the Bible in the name of proud scholarship. A man-centred emphasis settled upon the churches. The prevailing laxity and low view of the authority of Scripture allowed the charismatic movement to spread fast in the 20th century, with its characteristic practices of tongue-speaking, prophesying, healing, dancing, the use of high-powered music, etc..

A revival of interest in reformed theology began in the 1960s, focused at first in Britain and America. It began to spread worldwide, so that today a reformed movement is found in almost every part of the world. The Baptists and the Presbyterians have benefited most from this recovery. The older Particular Baptist churches have been revived and newer Reformed Baptist churches have been founded, the two streams merging to form a worldwide Reformed Baptist movement.

DISTINCTIVES

The beliefs of the Reformed Baptists are summarised in the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689. In this document, the major doctrines of the Bible are stated clearly and concisely, yet with sufficient fullness so as to provide a useful reference manual in this age of shallowness and confusion

Apart from referring to this document, how may we describe the Reformed Baptists? Reformed Baptists are characterised by the following emphases:

The sovereignty of God: God is all-powerful and in absolute control: in creation, history and salvation. God has predestined certain individuals from before the creation of the world to be saved. These are known as “the elect”. Every person is born sinful and is unable to do anything good to make God accept him. God calls out the elect from the world by the proclamation of the gospel, and

changes their nature by the power of the Holy Spirit so that they willingly turn to Christ to be saved. Christ died as a sacrifice in the place of the elect, and rose from death to give them eternal life. Salvation is therefore a free gift of God, not gained by human merit, but received by faith in Christ. This understanding of salvation has been called “Calvinism”.

The primacy of God’s word: Scripture is the sole authority in all matters of faith and practice. Preaching must occupy the central place in the worship service. The Bible is to be preached in an expository manner: giving the correct meaning and applications, and directed to the conscience of the hearers.

The purity of worship: The worship of God must be carried out “in spirit and in truth”, i.e. with sincerity and according to God’s word. Whatever is commanded must be followed, while anything not commanded must be rejected. This is sometimes called “the regulative principle”. Worship is kept God-centred, at the same time that the worshippers maintain a spirit of reverence, joy, warmth and love.

The purity of the church: The local church is central and unique in the purpose of God. Baptized believers voluntarily covenant together as a church to worship and serve God. A high level of commitment is required of the members, but no higher than what is taught in the Bible. Abilities differ from individual to individual, but the Lord only requires that one does what he is able, and no more. Through the exercise of pastoral oversight and church discipline, the membership is kept healthy and pure. No church is perfect in this world, but that does not mean a church should be allowed to lose its spirituality.

A radical discipleship: Reformed Baptists take seriously the truth that they have been bought by the blood of Christ. They belong to God and wish to glorify God by living in accordance to the teaching of Scripture, even at great personal cost to themselves. They are not extremists who love violence, nor fanatics who disrupt the peace of the public. Conscious that they have been reconciled with God, they actively seek to lead others to faith in Christ. They do not claim to be perfect but, in dependence upon God, attempt to live holy lives.

How do Reformed Baptists differ from other evangelicals?

There are evangelical churches that show great love for the Lord and have been mightily blessed by Him. Such churches put us to shame and make us yearn to live for the Lord better. Having said that, it remains true that there are evangelicals who are weak in precisely those five areas that the Reformed Baptists are strong. Many evangelicals think that it is enough to have faith in Christ, to pray, and to attempt to win souls for Christ. They also have a defective view of the sovereignty of God and a low view of the authority of Scripture. Quite many have succumbed to charismatic teaching and practice, and also compromised the truth by joining the ecumenical movement.

How do Reformed Baptists differ from other reformed Christians?

There are reformed Christians who hold to infant baptism, believing that the children of believers should be treated as church members and are therefore to be baptized. They baptize by sprinkling instead of immersion. The baptism of infants leads to a mixed church membership: one consisting of believers and non-believers. Reformed Baptists are of the view that only believers should make up the membership of the church.

Some churches claim that they are “reformed” when, in fact, they show no appreciation of the Reformation nor of the truths recovered at that time. Others hold to some of those truths but proceed no further. We do not use the word “reformed” in those ways.

How do Reformed Baptists differ from other Baptists?

Like the other evangelicals, most of the non-reformed Baptists are either fully-fledged Arminians or they hold to a modified Arminianism. Arminianism teaches that Christ died for every individual in the world, and man has free-will which must be exercised to “accept Christ” so as to be saved.

How do the Reformed Baptist Churches relate to other evangelical churches?

We recognise other churches as true churches of Christ when the fundamentals of the faith are upheld

by them. The limitations of time, ability and opportunity means that we have to practise selective fellowship with others. Truth determines the degree of closeness that we forge with other churches: the more of truth we agree upon, the closer is our fellowship, and vice versa. Consequently, our closest fellowship is with other Reformed Baptist churches, followed by other reformed churches, and then other evangelical churches.

How do the Reformed Baptist Churches relate to one another?

We have the same beliefs and practices, although there is not a boring uniformity among the churches. Many churches are associated together in a definite way, sharing resources in mutual support, the training of ministers, and church planting. The church members have the opportunity to meet together in annual church camps, conferences, and other combined meetings that are organised regionally from time to time.

What should I do to find out more about the Reformed Baptists?

Attend the weekly meetings of a church nearest you regularly, for a period of time. Talk to the church members and the elders. They will be able to explain to you more, and help you to get the books recommended below.

Recommended reading:

1. What is a Reformed Baptist Church? by B. S. Poh (Good News Enterprise).
2. The Five Points of Calvinism, by J. Seaton (Banner of Truth Trust).
3. Today's Gospel, by W. Chantry (Banner of Truth Trust).
4. A Journey in Grace, by Richard Belcher (Grace & Truth Books).
5. Websites: < www.rbcm.net >, < www.ghmag.net >.

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