

2014/6: What We Mean By “Reformed”

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Our subject is “What we mean by “Reformed”. It seems that the name “Reformed” is gaining popularity and respectability worldwide. More and more groups and individuals are using the name for themselves. Perhaps Christians are awakening to the realization that the charismatic movement of the past 50 years has serious weaknesses that do not stand up to the test of Scripture. Or perhaps the novelty of charismatic enthusiasm is wearing away and they are seeking something more stable and respectable instead. Whatever may be the reasons for the resurgence of interest in Reformed teaching, there are disturbing trends that tend to confuse and misrepresent the Reformed faith to the uninitiated.

We do not claim to have the sole right to use the word “Reformed”. Our aim here is to define the meaning of the word “Reformed” as used historically and as understood by many who call themselves “Reformed” today. In the process, we distance ourselves from those who use the word in a different way. We also attempt to draw those who have an interest in the Reformed faith to a better understanding of that faith itself. We believe the Reformed faith is the closest expression of the biblical system of teaching.

I. Characteristics of those who are “Reformed”.

Historically, the Reformed faith has been characterized by the following:

First, there is *thankfulness for the Reformation of the 16th century in Europe*. The Reformation rescued the churches from religious ignorance, gross superstition and spiritual darkness which prevailed under the influence of the Church of Rome. It recovered the place of the Bible as supreme and reclaimed the Bible for the common people. It restored preaching to the foremost place designed for it by God. It brought about the clarification of Christians truths in a number of excellent confessions of faith. It recovered a number of important doctrines such as the bondage of the will, the total corruption of human nature through original sin, justification by faith, etc. The Reformation which began in Europe spread to Britain and developed as Puritanism, in the 17th century. Reformed people today appreciate the rich trove of writings of the Puritans, despite the negative connotation given to the word “puritan” in some circles.

Second, there is *a belief in the sole authority of Scripture*. The Bible is the infallible and inerrant word of God. The Bible is the completely written word of God (2 Tim. 3:16-17; Rev. 22:18-19). There is no more new revelation to be given by the Holy Spirit. The Bible is sufficient for all our needs in doctrine and practice, until Christ returns to judge the world. The Holy Spirit who inspired holy men to write Scripture uses the written word to save God’s chosen people (2 Pet. 1:20-21; 1 Pet. 1:12; Rom. 10:17). The written word of God is used by the Holy Spirit to sustain believers in the faith (Matt. 4:4; Eph. 4:11-13; 5:26-27). Human traditions and human wisdom must not supplant the teaching of the Bible in the worship and service of God.

Third, there is *a deep appreciation for the confessions of faith produced during, and by, the Reformation*. There is adherence to one of these confessions of faith in the life of the church. There is declaration that the confession of faith expresses the belief of the church. There are non-confessional churches which piously declare that they have “no creed but the Bible”. Such churches are often weak doctrinally, and they are not known for making a stance for the truth. Their members are easily influenced by every wind of doctrine that come their way. There are churches that can trace their foundation to the Reformation but no longer pay serious attention to their confessions of faith. Such churches are often drawn away by Liberalism, Charismaticism, Arminianism, or Hyper-Calvinism¹.

Fourth, there is *a belief in the sovereignty of God in creation, in history, and in salvation*. God created the universe from nothing and continues to uphold all things created by the word of His power. He controls the decisions of kings without suppressing their personality nor minimizing their responsibility. He chose a definite and large number of people to be His own from eternity past, calls them out of their life of sin by the gospel, and regenerates them to eternal life by the power of the Holy Spirit. God may use means to carry out His purposes, but those means do not compete with His power and authority.

Fifth, there is *a desire for true Christian worship*. Worship must be in spirit and truth, i.e. it must be sincere and according to the teaching of Scripture. No human traditions and innovations must intrude. The form of worship found in the Old Testament has been replaced by the simplicity of New Testament worship. The symbols and types, such as the offering of animals and ceremonial cleansing, have been fulfilled in Christ by His death and resurrection. However, there is continuity in the principles of worship in the Old and New Testaments. Worship must be Godward, Christ-centred, expressing our covenant relationship with God, carried out in accordance to the Bible’s teaching, and spiritual in essence. The New Testament supply us with sufficient instructions on how we are to worship God today. Reformed churches uphold the Regulative Principle of worship, in contrast to the Permissive Principle held by most non-Reformed churches².

Sixth, there is *the recovery of powerful, expository preaching*. Preaching should occupy the primary place in worship. It should be an exposition of Scripture, in which the sense is made clear, or opened up to the hearers (‘exegesis’ as in contrast to ‘eisegesis’, i.e. reading into the passage one’s own ideas). It should be clarified with appropriate illustrations. It should be applied judiciously and boldly to the hearers. It must be prophetic in the sense that the message comes from God. Preaching, therefore, should be modeled on the apostles’ for boldness, urgency, integrity and power. We are not interested in preaching that is only intellectual, however correct it may be. We are concerned to see a resurrection of preaching which stirs the hearts and lives of the people. Preaching of this kind will be produced only with hard work and in dependence on the Holy Spirit, both in the preparation and in the delivery of the sermon. Furthermore, the preparation of the preacher’s heart is at least as important as the preparation of the message.

Seventh, *the belief in the importance of Biblical Theology*. Biblical Theology is the study of the history of divine revelation recorded in Scripture. God’s purpose in salvation, and in the formation of the church, is announced and expressed in the form of a covenant. (Since a primary focus of revelation is on salvation, Covenant Theology may be regarded as practically synonymous with Biblical Theology.) The unfolding and development of this covenant is one of the keys by which we can have a better grasp of the Bible. We differ from the Reformed Paedobaptists in the understanding of covenant theology³. The constant error of the Reformed Paedobaptists is to read the New Testament into the Old and having done that, to equate the two, setting them up as equal together. Reformed Baptists consistently give proper credence to the place, development and

importance of the covenant. The covenant of grace is one, although manifesting itself differently in different ages. There is only one way of salvation, which is by grace through faith, in Christ alone.

Those, then, are the seven characteristics of the Reformed faith as seen in its general outline. The Reformed faith may be viewed from its *doctrine* and its *practice*. Reformed *theology* is characterized by the five “solos”:

- o “sola scriptura”, Scripture alone is the sole authority in all matters of faith and practice.
- o “solus Christus”, Christ alone has accomplished salvation for His people by His sinless life and substitutionary death.
- o “sola gratia”, grace alone saves sinners, who are regenerated by the Holy Spirit through the hearing of the gospel.
- o “sola fide”, faith in Christ alone justifies the sinner before God, not his good works.
- o “soli Deo gloria”, to God alone be the glory is the grand aim of Reformed theology.

Reformed *praxis* is guided by two principles, viz. “sola scriptura” and “semper reformanda”. The Reformed Christian desires to order his life and the church he belongs to according to the teaching of Scripture. As he learns more of the teaching of Scripture, he desires to implement what he has learned and been convinced of. He is not content merely to have a head knowledge of the truth without obedience to it. He does not think that he or his church has arrived at perfection, but is “always being reformed”. The principle of “semper reformanda” reveals his attitude of heart towards the Lord. He loves the Lord and desires to obey His commands. He does not pick and choose what he likes, while ignoring what is inconvenient or difficult to accept.

II. Some trends and development in Christian circles.

We consider now the trends and development in Christian circles underlying the use of the name “Reformed”. Note that we refer to trends and development, not to specific groupings. If we were to discuss the groupings, there would be many already in existence and there would be many that arise in the days ahead. Rather, we are referring to the underlying principles and general characteristics of existing groups and movements. There are disturbing trends, and there is encouraging development.

Reformed traditionalism

Among the churches or denominations that arose from the Reformation of the 16th century in Europe, there are those that have continued to this day but lacking the vitality of their earlier years. They have good pedigree but poor spirituality. They maintain the forms of yesteryears, but have lost the essence and spirit of their forefathers. I refer here to a number of Dutch Reformed churches, Lutheran churches in Germany and Scandinavia, Anglican churches in England and Presbyterian churches in Scotland, together with their offshoots in other parts of the world. They have fixed liturgies of worship and take pride in their Reformed heritage, but pay lip service to their confessions of faith. They are supposed to be Reformed, but do not show the spirit of the Reformation. These churches may be said to hold to Reformed traditionalism.

Churches that hold to Reformed traditionalism might distance themselves from Roman Catholicism as their forefathers did, and resist the modern charismatic movement in order to maintain their traditions. The motive is more to uphold traditions rather than biblical doctrine. For that reason, they do not place much importance on their confessions of faith nor on the systematic exposition of the Bible. They often allow for aberrations to the Reformed doctrine of salvation. The Reformed doctrine of salvation has been summarized as the Five Points of Calvinism, or the doctrines of grace. Reformed traditionalists might hold to Hyper-Calvinism in principle or in practice. They might over-emphasize the sovereignty of God in salvation at the expense of human responsibility. They might not call upon hearers to repent and to believe in Christ in their preaching. Reformed

traditionalists might also hold to Hypo-Calvinism, in principle or in practice. (In Greek, “hyper” means above or more than, while “hypo” means below or less than.) Hypo-Calvinism over-emphasizes human responsibility at the expense of divine sovereignty.

The extreme form of Hypo-Calvinism is Arminianism. Reformed traditionalists would not embrace full-blown Arminianism. In fact, they might even speak out against Arminianism. However, they do not hold to the Five Points of Calvinism as espoused in the Canons of Dordt. Instead, they might tone down on one or two points of the doctrines of grace. Most Hypo-Calvinists have difficulty accepting the doctrine of Limited Atonement (or Particular Redemption). They would fall back on the overused cliché, “Christ’s death is sufficient for all and efficient for some”. They would evade the issue of the intent of Christ death - was it for the elect or for every individual in the world? This version of Hypo-Calvinism has been called Amyraldianism⁴. There are Hypo-Calvinists who would distort the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints. The claim is that it is possible for the elect to be lost if they do not persevere. Divine preservation is made to be dependent on human perseverance, instead of being concurrent with it. There is a failure to see that human perseverance is the means used by the sovereign God to preserve the saint in his faith. Human perseverance is not the cause of divine preservation, but *vice versa*.

Reformed minimalism

Another disturbing trend seen today may be called Reformed minimalism. Minimalism is the attempt to reduce something to the barest elements. It occurs in art, in music, in martial arts, in living, and even in gospel preaching⁵. Reformed minimalism attempts to trim down the Reformed faith to just the Five Points of Calvinism. To the minimalist, anyone or any group that holds to the Five Points of Calvinism is entitled to be called Reformed. In fact, even the name “Reformed” may be dispensed with as it is associated with Reformed traditionalism. The Reformed minimalist would be happy to have fellowship with anyone who holds to the Five Points of Calvinism. The doctrine of separation (from sin, heresy, and worldliness) is not their prime concern, nor is worship, nor is church government.

There are those who hold to the continuation of the miraculous gifts, who shy away from extreme expressions of the charismatic movement, and who appreciate expository preaching and the doctrines of grace. However, they are non-confessional and do not uphold the Regulative Principle of worship. They call themselves Reformed Charismatics when, in reality, they are not Reformed in the sense that is understood historically.

There are Baptists who have embraced the doctrines of grace, but remain non-confessional. They are happy to interact closely with confessional churches, whether of the baptist or paedobaptist kinds. They may be better described as Calvinistic Baptists instead of Reformed Baptists. Some such churches hold to New Covenant Theology, denying the relevance of the Ten Commandments in the Christian life. In particular, it is denied that the first day of the week is the Christian Sabbath. It is claimed that the Fourth Commandment is not binding on Christians as it is not quoted in the New Testament. Those who teach New Covenant Theology fail to see the danger of theological antinomianism leading to practical antinomianism.⁶

A cross-denominational movement called New Calvinism is drawing more and more people, notably those of the younger generation, together in mutual worship and fellowship⁷. Their professed appreciation of the writings of the Puritans, coupled with their acceptance of the doctrines of grace, have won them the support of certain confessional and Calvinistic Christian leaders. In the UK, the New Frontiers group of churches describe themselves as “reformed, charismatic and apostolic”. In the USA, the T4G (Together for the Gospel) conference, which started in 2006, draws thousands of mainly young people together to hear preaching. The uniting bond is a minimalist acceptance of the the doctrines of grace and a broad acceptance of contemporary worship styles.

The Gospel Coalition (TGC), which started in 2007, is led by notable men like Don Carson, Tim Keller and John Piper. New Calvinism rejects the abiding relevance of the Ten Commandments as a summary of the moral law of God for His people. It endorses coarse jesting, crude language, immodest dressing, smoking and tattooing as acceptable for Christians. It engages in contemporary worship which features rap music and punk rock. New Calvinism is not a resurgence of old Calvinism but a new expression of worldliness under the guise of a shallow, non-experimental, Calvinism.

Reformed biblicism

At about the same time that the charismatic movement started over 50 years ago, there was a resurgence of the Reformed faith which has continued to today. While there have been those who never came to the truly Reformed position, a steady stream of people were won to its fold. Those who never came all the way to the Reformed position would pay lip service to the principle of “sola scriptura”, i.e. the authority of Scripture in all matters of faith and practice. Those who have become clearly Reformed hold to both the principles of “sola scriptura” and “semper reformanda”, i.e. a desire to always be reformed, both in doctrine and practice. From the Reformation of the 16th century, there has been disagreement over issues of worship and church government among Reformed people. However, there has been reasonably clear agreement over the fundamental principles underlying these areas of disagreement. The Reformed faith carries a discernible set of family characteristics, which we have attempted to delineate above. The resurgence of the Reformed faith in recent years has shown a heartening biblicism reminiscent of the spirit of the Reformers of the 16th century. There is a desire to be biblical in all areas of faith and practice.

As far as the doctrine of salvation is concerned, the Reformed faith encompasses more than the Five Points of Calvinism. It embraces the totality of the biblical doctrine of salvation, which has come to be known as Calvinism. The Five Points are only a summary of the system of salvation believed to be taught in the Bible. They are the five fingers of the hand. They are not the whole hand, let alone the whole body. The Reformed faith is also concerned for the worship in the church. From its beginning, it reacted against the human traditions and innovations of the Roman Catholic Church. The burning of incense, the use of images (including the crucifix), the sign of the cross in prayer, the use of the rosary, and much else, were rejected as unbiblical intrusions to pure worship.

The competing claims of the Permissive Principle of worship and the Regulative Principle of worship has largely settled to the favour of the latter. The Permissive Principle basically states that in worship, whatever that is not forbidden by the Bible is permissible. The Permissive Principle used to be known as the Normative Principle, and continues to be known as such in certain circles. The Regulative Principle, on the other hand, states that whatever is commanded in the Bible is to be obeyed. The Regulative Principle of worship was forged in the heat of controversies that arose from a genuine desire to be faithful to the Bible. It is not surprising, therefore, to discover that it is as effective in countering the claims of contemporary worship as it had been effective in countering the innovations of Rome. Sadly, not all who claim to be Reformed today are equally clear on worship.

Reformed people have disagreed on the form of church government as well. However, there is agreement over the importance of the confession of faith in the life of the church. A Reformed church would adhere to a confession of faith that arose from the Reformation - whether it is the Three Forms of Unity (the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dordt), the Westminster Standards (the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Larger Catechism, and the Shorter Catechism), or the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith (together with Keach's Catechism). What needs to be noted is that confessional Christianity is inseparable from a church structure which provides for elders, church discipline and systematic teaching of the Bible. In short, the confession of faith is an expression of the belief of a church rather than that of an individual. A

Reformed Christian is one who is a member of a confessional church. There is the recognition of the centrality and uniqueness of the local church in the purposes of God. While there is ample opportunity for churches to enjoy unity and fellowship in the gospel, Reformed Christians would hardly support enterprises that smack of the spirit of the para-church organizations.

New Calvinism and Reformed biblicism are poles apart from each other. New Calvinism is minimalist in doctrine, promotes worldliness, and has a para-church ethos. It professes recognition of the importance of the local church, but engages in activities that are akin to those of the para-church organizations. It exists “to help local churches and pastors”⁸. It does not help the cause of truth for Reformed preachers to support New Calvinism.

III. The way ahead.

We have seen that Reformed biblicism upholds the Reformation principles of “sola scriptura” and “semper reformanda”. We are proposing here that the practical efforts made to fulfill these principles are best accomplished by recognizing and applying the three offices of Christ. Jesus Christ is the only Mediator between God and men. He is the only Head of the church. As Mediator, and as head of the church, He occupies the offices of prophet, priest, and king. As prophet, He reveals God and His will to His people. As our High Priest, He offered Himself up as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of His people, and continues to intercede for His people in heaven. As king, He rules over His people and leads them in spiritual battle.

The practical implication for the individual believer is that he must respond to Christ’s headship by submitting to Him as prophet, priest and king. The believer submits his total personality - mind, heart and will - to the headship of Christ. Knowing the word of Christ and engaging in heartfelt worship are not enough. One must proceed to submit his will to Christ, i.e. to seek to obey Him. The New Calvinist has advanced from the charismatic emphasis on the heart, i.e. on subjective feelings, by giving attention to doctrine. But he has not proceeded far enough to submission to Christ’s kingship, i.e. to emphasize on obedience to Him.

On the corporate level, submission to Christ’s headship requires that the church give due emphasis to doctrine, worship, and church government (including missions). Not only must the doctrine of salvation be biblical, but preaching and teaching God’s word must have the priority in the life of the church. The church needs to be confessional, i.e. upholding a good confession of faith. It must have biblical worship, in which the Regulative Principle is applied. It must also have biblical church government and a biblical missions policy. Not all Reformed churches are agreed on the minutiae of doctrine, worship and church government. Those who are truly Reformed differ from one another in these matters out of conscience, not because of tradition. It is because they sincerely came to different conclusions on the teaching of the Bible. However, because of their commitment to the authority of Scripture, and their desire to be biblical, they have ended up sharing certain family characteristics.

It is my personal conviction that the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith is the most mature of all the confessions of faith that came out of the Reformation. In it is found a paragraph, borrowed from the First London Baptist Confession of 1644, that summarizes this most crucial truth of the three offices of Christ. The opening words of the first sentence of Chapter 8, paragraph 10, on Christ the Mediator, are “This number and order of offices is necessary”. (Strangely, these most crucial words are left out of the edition of the Confession published by Carey Publications.) The substance of this paragraph of the 1689 Confession is not found in the Westminster Confession nor in the other Reformed confessions. In the work of reforming the church, and the Christian life, it is necessary to apply this number and order of Christ’s offices.

Errors in doctrine and practice have appeared in the past. Errors have appeared in the present time. We can expect more errors to appear in the future. All our Reformed brethren would be helped considerably in the work of reformation and in countering errors if they recognize and apply the doctrine of Christ's headship in all its fullness.

Conclusion

We have compared and contrasted Reformed traditionalism, Reformed minimalism, and Reformed biblicism. If you claim yourself to be Reformed, which of these do you hold to? Only those who hold to Reformed biblicism qualify to be regarded as truly Reformed.

References

1. *Liberalism* (or *Modernism*) emphasizes the intellect and denies the supernatural elements of the Bible. *Chrismaticism* emphasizes subjective feelings and affirms the continuance of the extraordinary gifts of tongue-speaking, prophecy and healing, while downplaying the importance of doctrine. *Arminianism* over-emphasizes human responsibility at the expense of divine sovereignty. *Hyper-Calvinism* over-emphasizes divine sovereignty at the expense of human responsibility.
2. See "Worship: The Regulative Principle and the Biblical Practice of Accommodation", by EC Reisinger and DM Allen (Founders Press, 2001).
3. On Covenant Theology, see:
 - (i) "Covenant Theology: From Adam to Christ," by Nehemiah Coxe and John Owen, edited by Ronald D Miller, James M Renihan, and Francisco Arozco (Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2005). A 17th century perspective of Covenant Theology consistent with the view of the Particular Baptists of the time.
 - (ii) "The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology: A Comparison Between Seventeenth-Century Particular Baptist and Paedobaptist Federalism", by Pascal Denault (Solid Ground Christian Books). A helpful summary of the discussion between the Baptists and their fellow Puritans of the 17th century, with applications to today.
 - (iii) "Covenant Theology: A Baptist Distinctive", edited by Earl Blackburn (Solid Ground Christian Books). A succinct introduction to the subject, suited to the serious Christian.
 - (iv) "The Fatal Flaw: of the Theology Behind Infant Baptism", by Jeffrey Johnson (Solid Ground Christian Books). Exposes the inconsistencies of the theology behind infant baptism.
 - (v) "The Kingdom of God: A Baptist Expression of Covenant & Biblical Theology", by Jeffrey Johnson (Solid Ground Christian Books). Complement of The Fatal Flaw, positively expounding the subject from the Baptist perspective.
 - (vi) "Covenant Theology: A Reformed and Baptist Perspective on God's Covenants", by Greg Nichols (Solid Ground Christian Books). A thorough treatment of the subject, suited to pastors and the serious Christian.
4. The Anglican Puritan, Richard Baxter, was Amyraldian and so was the Particular Baptist, Andrew Fuller. Today, there are Reformed churches which are Amyraldian in soteriology. Amyraldianism is also known as *Baxterism*.
5. On *maximalism* and *minimalism* in gospel preaching, see the article, "Unhealthy Trends In Gospel Preaching" at: http://www.ghmag.net/index.php?p=1_236_Reformed-Baptist-1689.
6. Antinomianism is a denial of the abiding relevance of God's law, as summarized in the Ten Commandments. A helpful book is, "In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology", by Richard Barcellos (Solid Ground Christian Books).

7. The characteristics of New Calvinism are well-documented in “The New Calvinists”, by ES Williams (Wakeman Trust).

8. “Together for the Gospel is not a ‘church’ movement; the focus is to help local churches and pastors.” This was the observation of Iain H Murray in his article “Thoughts On The ‘Together For The Gospel’ Conference”, Banner of Truth, June 2014, Issue 609.

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