



# “What Is A Reformed Baptist Church?”

## Study 4: What It Means To Be Reformed (Acts 9:26-31)

The name “Reformed” has become more acceptable, and even respectable, among Christians in recent years. Some are claiming to be “Reformed” without knowing its traditional meaning.

### **I. Reformed Churches And Other Evangelical Churches Considered**

1. There was a time when the use of the name *Evangelical* (i.e. Bible-believing) was sufficient to indicate the orthodoxy of a church. *Evangelical* was used in contrast to *Modernist*, a term applied to those who abandoned belief in the supremacy of Scripture and queried the plenary inspiration and divine authority of *the word written*. *Evangelical* was also used in contrast to *Roman Catholic*, being a better word than *Protestant* because *protestantism* has degenerated into a mere movement consisting of whole populations of merely nominal Christians. *Protestant* in many instances merely means *not Roman Catholic*.

2. It is necessary and good to revert to the use of the old name “Reformed” to distinguish ourselves from other Evangelicals because of modern challenges which include the following :

- (i) Arminianism has affected many churches. The truth of the sovereignty of God has been either forgotten or distorted.
- (ii) Modernism and Neo-orthodoxy, both of which reject the view that the Scriptures are without error, have infiltrated many churches and seminaries. Neo-orthodoxy is basically a form of Modernism which makes use of old, orthodox words like *faith* and *the elect* to mean something different. This is a subtle system which deceives many. It poses as a friend of Scripture, but destroys the authority of the Bible by rejecting the historical time-space events such as the literal resurrection of Christ and the virgin birth. Many seminaries, e.g. Princeton Seminary in the U.S.A. and the Free University of Amsterdam, are now controlled by those who deny the faith and reject the authority of Scripture.
- (iii) Ecumenism, i.e. a desire for visible unity among churches including the Church of Rome, is being preached and practised. This is done at the expense of truth. Some ecumenical leaders go so far in their abandonment of the gospel that they are prepared to worship with non-Christian religions — this being called *Inter-Faith*.
- (iv) Charismaticism, with its emphasis on gifts and experiences and its characteristic shallowness. in doctrine, has affected many churches.

## II Characteristics of Reformed Churches

### 1. *Thankfulness for the Reformation.*

The Reformation rescued the churches in Europe from religious ignorance, gross superstition and spiritual darkness which prevailed under the influence of the Church of Rome. The gospel, as well as many important truths of the Bible, were recovered. The preaching of God's word resulted in the salvation of many, the establishment of new churches, and the transformation of society. It can be said that the far-reaching effects of the Reformation continues to today.

### 2. *Commitment to the Five Principles of the Reformation.*

Reformed theology is characterised by the Five Principles of the Reformation, expressed in Latin as "sola scriptura" (Scripture alone), "sola fide" (faith alone), "sola gratia" (grace alone), "solus Christus" (Christ alone), and "soli Deo gloria" (to God alone be the glory).

"Sola scriptura" has been called "the formal principle of the Reformation". On it all other truths depend, and without it all discussion of differences between Christians is futile. "Soli Deo gloria" may be called "the crowning principle of the Reformation" for it provides impetus and aim to all Christian endeavours. It humbles man and makes him look up to God in all he attempts to do. It drives him to give his utmost for God, and restrains him from despair under God's chastisement. The other three principles summarise the gospel, showing that salvation is "by grace, through faith, in Christ, alone".

### 3. *Commitment to the Five Points of Calvinism.*

While the *gospel* is summarised by three of the five Principles of the Reformation, the *doctrine of salvation* is summarised by the Five Points of Calvinism. Easily memorised by the acrostic TULIP, the five points are Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints. Drawn up in response to the challenge of the Arminians, these "Doctrines of Grace" are today gaining wider acceptance. There are those who have had an experience almost like that of conversion when first conquered by these doctrines. It might be that some of these people were being converted for the first time, having been misled into thinking they were Christians by the shallow preaching they have been exposed to, and the perverted "gospel" they have heard.

There are those who would call themselves "Reformed" simply because they hold to the Five Points of Calvinism. They are better described as "calvinistic" in their doctrine of salvation, just as there are those who are better described as "baptistic" rather than Baptist. After all, the Five Points of Calvinism constitute only one of the marks of what it means to be "Reformed".

### 4. *Commitment to a Confession of Faith.*

The churches founded in the 16th and 17th centuries saw the value, and even the necessity, of having a Confession of Faith to define their belief. It was after the Great Awakening of the mid-18th century, followed by the rise of the modern missionary movement in the late 18th century, that Confessions of Faith fell out of use.

Reformed churches are "confessional", i.e. they adopt a Confession of Faith that arose from the Reformation, or an amended version of it, as the doctrinal standard. This practice arise from their thankfulness for the Reformation, the Reformation principle of "sola scriptura", and their submission to the prophethood of Christ. A Statement of Faith of, say, 15 articles of

doctrine is sufficient to show that we are a true, or Evangelical, church. However, it is not sufficient to distinguish us as Reformed unless a Confession of Faith is also adopted.

5. *Commitment to the Primacy of preaching.*

Upholding the principle of “sola scriptura” and submission to Christ’s prophethood would also mean commitment to the preaching of God’s word. Preaching should occupy the primary place in worship. It should be doctrinal, expository, and applicatory. It must be prophetic in the sense that the message comes from God. Preaching, therefore, should be modelled on that of the apostles’ for boldness, urgency, integrity and power.

We are not interested in preaching which is only intellectual, however correct it may be. We are concerned to see a resurrection of preaching which stirs the hearts and changes the 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. Men who are called by God to full-time ministry will have a clear ability to teach (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17; Eph. 4:11). Able men who are not called to full-time ministry should be recognised, trained, and encouraged to use their gift of teaching for the edification of the church.

6. *Commitment to the Regulative Principle of worship.*

Martin Luther argued for the Permissive (or Normative) Principle of worship which claims that whatever is not forbidden in Scripture is permissible. With time, those of the Reformed persuasion accepted John Calvin’s Regulative Principle of worship which claims that whatever is commanded in Scripture is to be obeyed, except for circumstantial matters of worship which are to be determined by common sense and the general rules of Scripture.

Worship should be God-oriented, joyful, full of thanksgiving. We gather to hear the public reading of Scripture, to sing psalms and hymns in praise to God, to be led in prayer and to hear the preaching of the Word by those called, equipped, recognised by the church, and set apart for the awesome task of public ministry. This view of worship is so different from that of the Roman Catholic practice where people gather to watch a mysterious and symbolical performance called the Mass. It is also different from many Evangelical churches that, knowingly or unknowingly, hold to the Permissive Principle. Such churches would allow: (i) just about anyone to lead public worship; (ii) performers to entertain others with music, songs, drama and dancing; and/or (iii) joking, lightness and frivolity to make the preaching-acceptable.

7. *Commitment to a Covenantal view of salvation.*

God’s purpose in salvation, and in the forming of the church, is announced and expressed in the form of a covenant — the covenant of grace. The unfolding and development of this covenant is one of the keys by which we can have a better grasp of the Bible. For this reason, it is not possible for Reformed people to hold to dispensationalism.<sup>1</sup> There are premillennial dispensationalists who have embraced the Five Points of Calvinism, but they are not Reformed. Some who call themselves Reformed have held inconsistently to so-called New Covenant theology in which the continuing relevance of the moral law, as summarised in the Ten Commandments, is denied, and especially the need to keep the Christian Sabbath day. Others who also hold to New Covenant Theology do not call themselves Reformed, but Sovereign Grace Baptists instead, preferring the 1644/6 Confession to the 1689 Confession.

We differ from Reformed Paedobaptists, however, in the understanding of the covenant. The constant error of the Reformed Paedobaptists is to read the New Testament into the Old and, having done that, to equate the two and setting them up as equal together. They insist that the Sinaitic covenant is only a different *administration* of covenant of grace, instead of seeing it as a manifestation of the covenant of works which Adam and Eve failed to keep in the garden of Eden. This is done because of their steadfast determination to retain infant baptism, which they equate with circumcision.

Reformed Baptists see the covenant of grace as revealed in parallel with the covenant of works, culminating in its full revelation as the new covenant in the New Testament. Hebrews Chapters 8-10 tell us clearly and unambiguously that the demands of the old covenant have been fulfilled by Christ, the Mediator of the new covenant. The revival of interest in Reformed theology in the 1960s resulted in this understanding of the covenant being dominated by the Paedobaptist version through their publications. It is a matter for rejoicing that the Baptist view has been revived to serve as an alternative, and even a corrective, to the Paedobaptist view.

= While we have no right to stop others from calling themselves “Reformed”, it would be good for us to know why we call ourselves “Reformed”.

### **Review Questions**

1. In the past, “Evangelical” was used in contrast to which two groups?
2. It is necessary and good to use the name “Reformed” because of what modern challenges?
3. State the seven characteristics of those who are truly Reformed.
4. State the Five Principles of the Reformation.
5. State the Five Points of Calvinism.
6. What is the place of preaching in worship?
7. State the Permissive Principle and the Regulative Principle of worship.
8. Which two views of salvation do we reject because of holding to the covenantal view of salvation?
9. How do Reformed Baptists differ from Reformed paedobaptists in their understanding of the Sinaitic covenant?
10. How do Reformed Baptists see the covenant of grace in relation to the covenant of works?

### **Assignment/Discussion**

1. Is it possible to discern the differences between a Reformed church and another Evangelical church from: (i) the worship service; and (ii) the members? What differences would there be? Are these a matter: (a) of concern; and (b) to be proud of?
2. Christians from other Evangelical churches may say to you that the distinctives of Reformed churches are also found in theirs, only the emphasis placed upon them may differ. What is your response to this?
3. “Reformed Christians are too dogmatic and rigid to my liking.” Comment.

### **Memory Passage (Eph. 4:4-6)**

4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

Footnote:

1. The idea that God saves in different ways in the various periods known as “dispensations”, that the nation of Israel and the Gentile church are distinct entities, and that there will be a “rapture” when believers are caught up to heaven, distinct from the second coming of Christ for judgement of the world.

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