

## What Does It Mean To Be Reformed?

To be Reformed is to be a Calvinist. Though Calvinism and Reformed are not synonymous terms they are nearly so and most people use them interchangeably so for the purposes of this statement I will regard them as expressions of, essentially, the same body of truth.

Reformed theology is a robust and comprehensive system of God-centered belief that provides explanation and expression of the teachings and, hence, the theology of the entire Bible. It did not emerge in a vacuum but found explicit form in the 16<sup>th</sup> century as a response to the errors, excesses and inaccuracies of Roman Catholicism. Its early proponents included Luther, Zwingli and Calvin and it was the dominant commitment of the Protestant church through the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Reformed theology holds to the five solas of the Reformation:

1. Sola Scriptura—Scripture alone
2. Sola Gratia—Grace alone
3. Sola Fide—Faith alone
4. Sola Christus—Christ alone
5. Soli Deo Gloria—glory to God alone

### Reformed Theology is Covenantal

Reformed theology is covenantal in that it sets the Gospel into the context of God's eternal plan for His people and views its historical outworking in relation to the covenants of works and grace. Reformed (i.e. covenant) theology is an approach to interpreting and understanding the Scriptures that arise from the Scriptures themselves and helps to explain the unity of redemptive revelation.

C.H. Spurgeon said it well: "The doctrine of the covenant lies at the root of all true theology. It has been said that he who well understands the distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, is a master of divinity. I am persuaded that most of the mistakes which men make concerning the doctrines of Scripture are based upon fundamental errors with regard to the covenant of law and of grace. May God grant us now the power to instruct and you the grace to receive instruction on this vital subject."

Reformed Theology stands in agreement with the consensus of the first five hundred years of the church:

1. There is one omnipotent, benevolent God who is distinct from His creation.
2. Classic Trinitarianism as expressed at Nicea and Chalcedon. One God, eternally existent in three distinct persons—The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
3. Jesus Christ is fully God yet fully man. He, and He alone, is the one mediator between God and man.
4. All human beings are created in the image and likeness of God but are radically and completely fallen in every faculty of their being.
5. The visible church, comprising all the redeemed, Spirit-filled people—otherwise known as the mystical body of Christ on earth.
6. The sacraments of baptism and communion.

### Reformed Theology holds to the, so-called, Five points of Calvinism

These Five Points do not serve as a summary of Calvinistic teaching but arose as a response to the Five Articles of the Arminian Remonstrants (see Phillip Schaaf [History of the Christian Church](#) Vol. 3). These Five Points, however, are at the heart of Reformed theology and make significant statements about

God, man, salvation, atonement and assurance. The Five Points have come to be summarized by the acronym TULIP.

T - Total Depravity

U - Unconditional Election

L - Limited Atonement

I - Irresistible Grace

P - Perseverance of the Saints

### **Total Depravity**

Total depravity is a way of saying that man is completely, radically and comprehensively fallen because of sin (Romans 3:10-18). This does not mean that man is as bad as he could be, it does not mean that all men are equally bad and it does not mean that man is devoid of any and all virtue. It does mean that there is not a single faculty of man's being that has not been broken and corrupted by sin.

Man's total depravity leads logically to his total inability. He is dead in his sins and utterly incapable of loving God or doing anything meriting salvation (Ephesians 2:5; Romans 8:6-8). If any man is to be saved from his desperate state it is God who must do the saving: "But God being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:4-6).

### **Unconditional Election**

Unconditional election refers to God's choice in salvation (Eph. 1:3-5). All men deserve wrath and judgment (Romans 1:18-19) but God, because of His great love, chooses to save some. God's choice to save some is not predicated upon any condition that man must meet in order to merit God's choosing—after all sinful man is dead in his transgressions and totally incapable of doing anything to merit his salvation. God declares "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy" (Romans 9:15-16). We are not saying that salvation is unconditional as it is conditioned upon repentance and faith in Christ. But faith and repentance are not the conditions for election. Election is the condition (the necessary state of affairs) for faith and repentance. God's unconditional choice to save certain lost sinners led to Christ's purchase of their redemption through His substitutionary, atoning sacrifice on the cross and the winning of their hearts through irresistible grace.

### **Limited Atonement**

Limited atonement answers the question: "Did Jesus Christ offer himself on the cross as a sacrifice for sin for every person without distinction or exception, thereby rendering salvation a possibility for all men? Or does Christ's atoning sacrifice have particular reference to the elect (those given by the Father) ensuring that their salvation is certain?" (John 6:37).

To speak of limited atonement is to say that Christ did not die for all men in the same way. If Christ died for all men in the same way then all would be saved. No Christian believes that Christ died for some of the sins of all men because none would be saved. Some Christians believe that Christ died for all the sins of all men. If that be true then why are all not saved? They answer, "Because of unbelief." But is not unbelief one of the sins Christ died for? If it is not then it is possible for man to be saved without having all of his sins atoned for. If unbelief is a sin Christ died for then all must be saved. By the force of scripture and logic we are driven to affirm that Jesus Christ was an atoning sacrifice for all the sins of some men.

Scripture bears this out as Christ came “to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). In Ephesians 5:25 Scripture reads that “Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Hebrews 9:28 says, “So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many...” Notice the Scripture says “many” not all, and says “the church” not every man. Boettner explains it this way: “The nature of ransom is such that when it is paid and accepted it automatically frees the persons for whom it was intended...Justice demands that those for whom it is paid shall be freed from any further obligation. If the suffering and death of Christ was a ransom for all men rather than for the elect only, then the merits of His work must be communicated to all alike and the penalty of eternal punishment cannot be justly inflicted on any” (p.155 The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination).

We conclude that Christ’s death on the cross has benefits for all men but saving benefits only for the elect. Another way of understanding this glorious truth is “particular atonement.”

### **Irresistible Grace**

Irresistible grace does not mean that the work of the Holy Spirit cannot be resisted it does mean that the Holy Spirit is able to overcome all resistance. Irresistible grace asserts that God is able to overcome all resistance when He so wills (Job 42:2). Romans 9:19 puts it like this: “For who resists His will?”

Irresistible grace refers to the sovereign work of God in overcoming the sin and rebellion in our hearts and drawing us irresistibly to Himself. His work is not one of coercion but rather He wins our heart so that our love for Him and faith in Him are free expressions not forced. Irresistible grace encompasses regeneration (John 1:12-13) and saving faith. It may be expressed that regeneration is an effect of irresistible grace.

### **Perseverance of the Saints**

According to the scripture all those whom God predestined He also calls. All that He calls are certain to be justified and all who are justified will one day be glorified (Romans 8:30). To be a child of God is to be secure eternally.

However, perseverance means much more than this. Jesus said “it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved” (Matthew 10:22). Saving faith is always an enduring or persevering faith. One of the proofs that your faith is saving is that it endures. This does not mean that a genuine Christian cannot backslide but it does mean that a genuine Christian will not persevere in his/her backsliding.

It is God who begins the good work in the heart of a Christian and it is God who will see it through to completion (Philippians 1:6). This calls for obedience and hard work on the part of the Christian. However, obedience and hard work are not the grounds of faith or of God’s favor but are an evidence of both (Philippians 2:12-13). God will enable His elect to persevere to the end (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24; 1 Corinthians 1:8-9).