

CHURCH SERIES – REFORMED

“What is a Reformed Church?” (Romans 8:29-39; 9:10-16)

The Reformed churches are Protestant denominations historically related by a similar Calvinist system of doctrine, which emerged from the Swiss Reformation under John Calvin. From there it spread rapidly throughout Western Europe. Notable places of influence were the Reformed churches in Switzerland, Holland, France, and Scotland. Reformed preachers and theologians of renown in church history are Augustine, John Calvin, the Puritans, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards and Charles Spurgeon.

In a general sense all the churches that grew from the sixteenth-century revolt against the Roman Catholic Church, can be called reformed. However, the “Reformed” phase of Protestantism specifically designates an ecclesiastical structure that arose almost simultaneously with Lutheranism, but was distinct from it. Reformed churches are historically mainly Presbyterian but today Reformed Baptists are common also. Indeed one of the great preachers of Reformed doctrine was the Baptist, CH Spurgeon. He declared,

The old truth that Calvin preached, that Augustine preached, that Paul preached, is the truth that I must preach today, or else be false to my conscience and my God. I cannot shape the truth; I know of no such thing as paring off the rough edges of a doctrine. John Knox’s gospel is my gospel. That which thundered through Scotland must thunder through England again.

The Reformed churches hold to certain fundamental truths, which it shares in common with every true Christian church throughout history such as the virgin birth, the infallibility of the Bible, the Deity of Christ etc. However, it also has distinctive beliefs that distinguish the Reformed churches.

REFORMED DISTINCTIVE BELIEFS

The Reformed churches follow what is popularly known as Calvinism or the Doctrines of Grace. This is a system of doctrinal belief most consistent with the totality of Scripture. It emphasizes God’s sovereignty, man’s depravity and the salvation of God’s elect by grace alone.

The Reformed beliefs were first systematized by John Calvin and then subsequently set down in the historic creeds of the Reformed churches such as the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the *Canons of the Synods of Dordt*, and the *Westminster Confession*. However, it is important to note that Reformed doctrine did not originate with John Calvin. He merely systematized the theology of Scripture. Calvin’s writings were merely a restating of what the Bible teaches us.

JOHN CALVIN

The father of the Reformed churches is undoubtedly John Calvin (1509-1564). Although born and educated in France, his chief area of ministry was in Geneva, Switzerland. There he established the Reformed movement as the most significant force in Protestantism.

Calvin was a preacher and a theologian. He disliked immensely speculation by theologians and preacher beyond the text of Scripture. He sought nothing more than a return to

biblical and apostolic teaching and practice. His careful and precise approach spawned a whole system of theology named after him. Indeed, no theologian has sparked such ardent acclaim or animosity as Calvin. Philip Melanchthon at the Conference at Worms in 1541, overwhelmed by Calvin's theological acumen, called him "The Theologian."

It was principally through his writings that the Reformed/Calvinist system spread into the various European nations. Through his writings, Calvin consolidated the gains of the Reformation by drawing up a systematic theology to organise its churches according to the purity of the New Testament pattern. Neither Luther nor Zwingli exerted an international influence equal to Calvin's. The French Huguenots organised themselves on a Calvinist basis. In Holland, Calvinism was adopted as the state religion in 1662. The movement rapidly advanced throughout Western Europe and eventually touched America through the Puritans settlers there. The Church Historian, Philip Schaff acknowledges Calvin's widespread influence,

Every people of Europe was represented among Calvin's disciples. He helped to shape the religious character of churches, and the political moral and social life of nations yet unborn. The Huguenots of France, the Protestants of Holland and Belgium, the Puritans and Independents of England and New England, the Presbyterians of Scotland and throughout the world, yea, we may say, the whole Anglo-Saxon race, in its prevailing religious character and institutions, bear the impress of his genius, and show the power and tenacity of his doctrines and principles of government.

Calvin himself made clear that his theology was centred in the desire to display the glory of God in Christ because salvation is God's work alone. Salvation is "*the gift of God*" (Eph. 2:8). It is not a joint venture between God and man. Calvin declared, "The thing [O God] at which I chiefly aimed, and for which I most diligently labored, was, that the glory of thy goodness and justice . . . might shine forth conspicuous, that the virtue and blessings of thy Christ . . . might be fully displayed." The system of Reformed doctrine that Calvin espoused has been popularised in the acronym: T.U.L.I.P.

Total Depravity

Unconditional Election

Limited Atonement, or, better, Particular Redemption

Irresistible Grace

Perseverance and Preservation of the Saints

These five points were actually five points set forth at the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619) in response to a challenge made by the followers of a Dutch theologian called Jacob Arminius. These points explain how God saves a sinner and why He saves him. The church leaders at Dordt stated, "These Five Points are the points that lie at the heart of the genius of the theology of the Reformer of Geneva."

(1) **TOTAL DEPRAVITY** – This is the biblical picture of fallen man as having his whole character tainted by the pollution of sin, "*As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.*" (Rom. 3:10-11; cf. Jer. 17:9; Eph. 3:1) Every apple in the barrel of humanity is rotten! All of humanity is under the curse,

condemnation, and power of sin. Every part of man's nature, including body and soul, are corrupted by sin. We are corrupt in our mind, in our will, and in our affections.

Total depravity also denotes that fallen man has no ability to change the bias of his will toward sin or merit God's favour. We are totally unable to work for salvation from the Lord. Even fallen man's outwardly good actions are tainted by the motive of sin such as pride, self-glory etc. If any human deed is not done absolutely for the glory of God then God sees it as not good and worthless. Isaiah concurred with this as he wrote, "*But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags*" (Isa. 64:6).

Some Reformed theologians prefer the expression *total inability*, as the term *total depravity* is commonly misunderstood by many as meaning a person is as wicked as it is possible to be. Sin makes it impossible for man to truly understand the truth about God and man (1 Cor. 2:14). Our wills are not free in the absolute sense but are slaves to our sinful natures. Fallen man is blinded to his need of God's grace. This ignorance is not the result of lack of innate knowledge or opportunity (cf. Rom. 1:19-20; 2:15; Eph. 4:18).

(2) **UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION** – This doctrine is logically based on the truth of the first. If man is totally unable to seek after God's holiness and grace, then it follows that God must choose man for salvation. This choice is sovereign which is not based on any foreseen merit or obedience on man's part, "*According as He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will*" (Eph. 1:4-5; cf. 1 Peter 1:2; 1 Thess. 5:19; 2 Thess. 2:13; Rom. 8:30). Sometimes this doctrine is commonly referred to as the doctrine of predestination. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* summarises this doctrine,

God has predestined and foreordained some men and angels to everlasting life out of His free grace and love without any foresight of faith or works in man or perseverance in either of them, and others are foreordained to everlasting death and the number of either is so certain and definite that it cannot be increased or diminished. (Chap. III, art. 3,4 &5)

A classic illustration of this doctrine is seen at the end of the book of Acts,

And when they had appointed him a day, there came many to him into his lodging; to whom he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening. And some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not. (Acts 28:23-24)

Here is a situation where the same type of people from the same background heard the same message from the same preacher from the same Bible, yet some believed and others rejected. What made those believe and the others reject? Intellect or ability cannot account for it. So what makes the unwilling willing? It is the workings of sovereign grace in the heart of one and not in the other. Or to put it another way, "He doesn't make you go against your will, He just makes you willing to go." The group who believed were those like Lydia, "*whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul*" (Acts 16:14). This truth is equally true for us today. Often we witness the same truth in our society. Lloyd Jones observes,

How often has this happened in a family! Two brothers, with the same father and mother, the same home, the same upbringing, who went to the same school, the same chapel, and the same Sunday School, and heard the same gospel – everything the same. One believes and the other does not.

God's sovereignty not only necessitates election, but also if God had not unconditionally elected by sovereign grace every believer then there is not a person who would ever be saved. All of us would be lost. The doctrine of unconditional election is not a view that is some personal theological perspective of Paul or John Calvin. The Lord Jesus Christ taught it also. He declares, "*My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand.*" (John 10:29; cf. 6:39; 17:2).

(3) **LIMITED ATONEMENT** – Although this term is often used to describe this doctrine, a better term is *particular redemption*, as there is nothing limited in the power of the atonement of Christ! This doctrine states that Jesus Christ offered Himself with the purpose of saving His elect. He perfectly purposed what He set out to achieve. This truth was revealed to Joseph before the birth of Christ, "*thou shalt call His name JESUS: for He shall save His people from their sins*" (Matt. 1:21). Jesus Christ came to save somebody! He did not come just to make salvation possible. He did not come to die for no one in particular but for His sheep, "*I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth His life for the sheep*" (John 10:11).

God limits the atonement in its efficacy, design and ultimate application. That does not mean that this implies that there is something impotent or lacking in Christ's atonement. The atonement is absolutely infinite in its value. Augustine summed the balance up when he wrote, "Sufficient for all, efficient for the elect." There is no failure in the actual atonement of Jesus Christ. He saved every single soul He intended to save. Dr Alan Cairns points out,

The truly *limited* view of the atonement is the Arminian view which postulates that Christ intended by His death to save all men without exception, for obviously He did not save all men. Unless Arminians adopt the heresy of universal salvation, their theory of the atonement exposes the work of Christ to the charge of wholesale failure. To hold the theory of universal atonement without accepting universal salvation as its necessary corollary leads to the inevitable conclusion that Christ's atonement did not actually secure the salvation of those for whom He offered it. That is the theory that truly deserves to be termed "*limited atonement.*"

(4) **IRRESISTIBLE GRACE** – The fourth point of Dordt was irresistible grace. This doctrine reveals that a sovereign God effectually calls His elect to salvation. This is the special or effectual call of the elect individual. This takes place on earth. It also has to be generated from God as depraved man naturally resists the general call of the gospel, "*There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.*" (Romans 3:10-11) Unless the Lord issues an effectual call, all of us would perish in our sins as we naturally resist the call of God. The Lord Jesus Christ also established this theological principle, "*No man can come to Me, except the Father which hath sent Me draw him*" (John 6:44). John MacArthur summarises,

It is, 1 Corinthians 1:30, by God's power that you are Christ's, by His power so that if you glory, you glory in Him. If you have life, it is from God. If you have light, it is from

God. If you have sight, it is from God. If you have understanding, it is from God. If you have repentance, it is from God. If you have faith to embrace Christ, it is from God. It is the work of God. God alone can give life. God alone can regenerate. And it is the power of God alone that brings salvation to the sinner.

There is no better illustration of this than the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. He did not suddenly “decide for Christ.” When God effectually called him he was on his way to Damascus full of zeal and hatred for everything Jesus Christ represented. Then God sovereignly stepped in and called him by grace alone. Paul never ceases to be amazed at this truth, even as a mature apostle. Writing to the Galatians, Paul sees the electing work of grace preparing him for his conversion and ministry before he was even born,

But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by His grace, To reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: (Gal. 1:15-16)

Dr. Harry Ironside used to illustrate this by telling the story of a prayer meeting where a man gave a stirring testimony of God’s grace in his life. Afterwards someone came up to him and said, “My brother, that was a fine testimony you gave. You talked a lot about God, but you didn’t mention your own part in salvation.” The man considered for a moment and then said, “You’re right. I did leave that out. My part was to run away from God as fast as I could, and God’s part was to run after me until He caught me.”

(5) **PERSEVERANCE AND PRESERVATION OF THE SAINTS** – The final point of the established five points is the perseverance and preservation of God’s true elect. It teaches that those who have truly saved will never fall from that state and be lost (cf. Rom. 11:29; John 10:28; 2 Thess. 3:3; 2 Tim. 1:12; 1 Pet. 1:5). Salvation begins and ends with God from election to eventual glorification in heaven. It is not a co-operative joint venture between God and you. If it were, it would produce a rollercoaster ride of emotions as anything that depends upon us can be lost by us. But because salvation depends on God then what He does is perfect and settled forever. This is because it is rooted in God’s love, God’s power, God’s grace, and God’s faithfulness.

This is where Arminians, like John Wesley, got it wrong. Salvation from foreknowledge to glorification in heaven never was nor ever will be about what man has done, but about what Christ has done. That is why Job could say with such confidence,

For I know *that* my redeemer liveth, and *that* he shall stand at the latter *day* upon the earth: And *though* after my skin *worms* destroy this *body*, yet in my flesh shall I see God (Job 19:25-26)

That is why David could also say of his departed son, “*But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me*” (2 Sam. 12:23). He was also confident that he would, “ *dwell in the house of the Lord forever*” (Psa. 23:6). The Apostle Paul was equally as certain, “*for me to live is Christ and to die is gain*” (Philp. 1:21). He wrote also to the Philippian saints one of the clearest statements on this, “*Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ*” (Philp. 1:6). His emphasis

should be noted – it is God who began this good work and it is God who *“will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.”*

I know the perverted heart of some men can abuse every doctrine of Scripture. This truth can never be used to mean we have a license to sin as John explains that a true believer will never have this attitude, *“And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure”* (1 John 3:3). A man once confronted Martin Luther on this very point, with the remark, “If this is true, a person could simply live as he pleased!” Luther wisely replied, “Indeed! Now, what pleases you?”

If God did not sovereignly foreknow, predestinate, call, justify His elect people then we would have no assurance today that we will one day be glorified. If it was down to us to keep our salvation by our holiness, then no one would last 24 hours. But that is the beauty of sovereign election. It is, *“that the purpose of God according to election might stand”* (Rom. 9:11). God’s sovereign election of His people is the only assured way of His purpose and plan coming to a perfect fulfillment.

Believers should be rejoicing in the fact that our salvation is secure in Christ from the beginning to the end. Jesus promised the perseverance of the saints, *“While I was with them in the world, I kept them in thy name: those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled”* (John 17:12). To say we persevere is not to say we are perfect. Saints can fall into sin – look at Lot, David, and Peter etc. Surely if a true believer could lose his or her salvation would Lot, David or Peter not have done so? But God does not abandon them, though they may suffer temporal judgments.

So our salvation is secure because it is tied up in God’s sovereign will and keeping power. Trust the promises of Jesus Christ who promised, *“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life”* (John 3:16). In the Bible *“everlasting life”* or eternal life is nothing more or less than the life of God himself. Because He is eternal, the life He gives is eternal. And that life begins in us the moment we believe. For if you could lose it, it is not truly eternal, but rather merely temporary life!

If you are trusting on the perfect righteousness of Christ alone to save you from your sin, then don’t let the devil rob you of assurance of salvation. It was never about whether you had done enough to justify yourself and it will never be about whether you have done enough to keep yourself. Christ has done enough to keep you and save you. Job, David, Paul, the Philippian saints were sure. You too today, who are justified by faith alone, can be sure of heaven, as if you have been there already ten thousands years!