

What Is a
REFORMED
CHURCH?



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Malcolm H. Watts

Foreword by Joel R. Beeke



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Foreword



Finally—a sound, concise, yet meaty little book on the basics of the Reformed faith, Reformed ecclesiology, and Reformed evangelism. *What Is a Reformed Church?* serves the church of Jesus Christ in several ways. Let me mention a few:

- It provides an *authoritative* treatment of the Reformed faith. “Thus saith the Lord” runs through every chapter. Substantial answers are offered to important questions; every page is packed with scriptural proof clarifying the mind of the Spirit as revealed in the Scriptures. God’s will, not man’s, is consulted in areas such as church government, church discipline, and church worship, areas where natural man is so eager to accommodate human tastes and wishes.
- It provides a *sound* treatment of the Reformed faith. For example, the author unabashedly upholds the regulative principle of Scripture for public worship. His book presents a well-reasoned and historically informed understanding of the Reformed perspective on worship, showing that God claims the right to determine the objects, occasions, forms, and content of our worship. He persuades us that worship must be viewed as a means of grace and must impact all that we are and do. Unlike so many contemporary works on worship

by those who may even call themselves Reformed, the author refuses to allow carnal methods or content to infiltrate or compromise the worship of the church.

- It provides a *broad* treatment of the Reformed faith. The book does not fall into the trap of limiting Calvinism to five points. It also deals with God's kingdom rule, the covenant of grace, the experience of grace, the proclamation of the gospel, and the consecration of life.
- It provides a *balanced* treatment of the Reformed faith, stressing God's transcendence and sovereignty as well as man's depravity and responsibility. God's sovereignty in saving men and His offer of grace to sinners are both given their rightful due. Here is Reformed theology cogently, accurately, and simply presented.
- It provides an *experiential* treatment of the Reformed faith. The author underscores the necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's heart and life. This book avoids the caricature of Calvinism as a harsh, cold system; rather, here is genuine, winsome Calvinism that, under the Spirit's tutelage, transforms hearts, minds, and lives.
- It provides a *tried* treatment of the Reformed faith. The author personally knows the faith. He has preached these truths in his own church and has implemented the biblical, godly way of worship that he promotes. I have watched him lead Reformed worship among his own people in a most biblical, edifying manner and have also had the privilege of preaching on several occasions to his dear flock, which has been well trained to listen to God's Word and to worship God with all their hearts.

- It provides a *doxological* treatment of the Reformed faith. This book's accent is on the humble and holy praise of an awe-inspiring, sovereign, personal God, who is worthy to be worshiped with all our mind, soul, and strength.

Malcolm Watts's *What Is a Reformed Church?* is an excellent work for those just discovering the Reformed faith as well as for those who are more advanced but need to be reminded of its distinctives. Ministers would do well to urge their consistory or sessions to provide a copy for every church member or family. Its biblical content, sanctified scholarship, challenging insights, and warm pastoral applications are just what the church needs today. I know of no better basic Reformed handbook for believers.

Read this book more than once. Discuss it with your friends. Let its truths penetrate your mind and souls. Bow and worship the sovereign God that it so ably presents.

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CHAPTER 1



The Distinctives of a Reformed Church

The church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

—1 Timothy 3:15

In our day, the term *Reformed* is used freely and without thought. Great variety exists among churches that claim this title. In many cases, the term means little more than some adherence to the “five points of Calvinism.” The term has lost its great historical richness and depth as the struggles of the Reformation have faded into distant history. The stand taken by the Reformers is virtually forgotten, and many consider it irrelevant today. If, however, we have a true and earnest desire to maintain the faith and fight the adversaries of God’s Word, we would do well to look back to those who so clearly searched the Scriptures and stood firmly for the great truths of the Word of God. This chapter will briefly examine the roots of the term *Reformed* and then highlight the distinctives of a Reformed church, namely biblical doctrine, pure worship, right government, spiritual discipline, and faithful evangelism.

If asked what a Reformed church is, one could give a short biblical answer from 1 Timothy 3:15: “the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.” A true church, Reformed according to God’s Word, is the dwelling place of

God, maintaining and declaring the truth which He has been pleased to reveal. However, over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the term *Reformed* was understood to have at least three quite specific meanings, so it will be helpful to take a brief look at the historic use of the term.

In the 1500s, people first used *Reformed* to refer to churches that, under the vigorous preaching of the early Reformers, separated from the corrupt Church of Rome. In 1517, Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Saxony. Writing shortly afterwards, in 1518, Luther called for reformation of the church. The pope issued a bull in 1520 condemning both Luther and his doctrines; but on receipt of that bull, Luther said, "For me, the die is cast. I despise alike Roman fury and Roman favor. I will not be reconciled or communicate with them."¹ As his teaching spread throughout Germany, churches abolished private masses, administered communion with bread *and* wine, and removed images from the buildings they used for the public worship of God. Churches that embraced Luther's doctrine soon became known as Reformed.

In the mid-1500s, the term assumed a new emphasis: It was used to identify the so-called Calvinist wing of the Reformation. Enthusiastic supporters of Luther became known as Lutherans, or even as "Adherents of the Augsburg Confession" (the first Reformation confession, drawn up by Melancthon in 1530). But men like John Calvin (who preached in Geneva from 1536 to 1564) proceeded much further in reformation with respect to worship, government, and practice, and they

1. Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1978), 151.

came to be identified as “the Church Reformed according to the Word of God.” This phrase was first used in article 6 of the Peace of Westphalia, a 1648 treaty intended to secure equal rights for Protestant churches within the boundaries of the Roman Empire.

The term *Reformed* evolved further until it came to identify churches that were Puritan in belief and in practice. The Puritan movement inherited Calvin’s theological legacy but expanded his teaching on law, grace, and the covenants. Believing the visible church was still corrupted by the remains of popery, Puritans sought even more thorough reformation according to the Word of God. They pointed out that Reformed churches on the Continent already had abolished unbiblical forms, ceremonies, and vestments. They believed the English church was hardly deserving of the epithet *Reformed*; it was, they said, only “half-Reformed.” Puritanism was responsible for a remarkable document, the Solemn League and Covenant, to which the Westminster Assembly, the general synod called by the Long Parliament for settling affairs in the Church of England, subscribed in 1643. The covenant committed to seek a “reformation of religion in the kingdoms of England and Ireland, in doctrine, worship, discipline and government, according to the Word of God and the example of the best reformed Churches.”²

In all the cases considered above, we can see common distinctives between churches that have been called Reformed. It is true that, proceeding historically, the later Reformed churches were more consistent in the outworking of these

2. Westminster Assembly, The Solemn League and Covenant, in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1981), 359.

principles, yet it is clear that these emphases were present in each. Today, when the term is so loosely used, it is important to consider what these common distinctives were, and to understand that these essential attributes of a Reformed church are what make a biblical church.

Scripture Alone

A Reformed church must acknowledge Scripture, God's written Word, as the sole authoritative expression of the divine will for all aspects of church life. Luther recognized this, but it was Calvin who articulated it carefully. The Westminster theologians consistently followed through. At a council in Toulouse in 1229, the Church of Rome issued the following decree: "We prohibit also the permitting of the laity to have the books of the Old and New Testaments."³ One dreadful consequence of this in the sixteenth century was that, apart from a few scattered copies of Wycliffe's translation, there were no English-language Bibles to be found in Britain. When Tyndale translated the New Testament and shipped numerous copies to England, Bishop Tunstall secured as many as he could find in order to burn them at St Paul's Cross, the northeast corner of the churchyard belonging to St. Paul's Cathedral. What a dreadful sight it must have been, to watch God's Word being publicly burned! The church and nation were without the Bible, and as a result, there was widespread ignorance, not only among the people, but also among the clergy. When John Hooper became bishop of Gloucester in 1551, he found that 168 of the 311 clergy in his diocese did not

3. William Cathcart, *The Papal System* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publications Society, 1872), 435.

know the Ten Commandments, and 31 of them did not know who first taught us the Lord's Prayer.⁴ England was devoid of religious knowledge and understanding. Inevitably, the church became subject to the will and whim of men. All kinds of things were introduced without biblical warrant; error and corruption were allowed to spread unchecked.

The Reformers believed the Scriptures to be the pure Word of God. As Luther put it, they "ascribe[d] the entire Holy Scripture to the Holy Spirit."⁵ At the famous Diet of Worms, he boldly declared, "Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me."⁶ As for Calvin, he too affirmed the total veracity of the Scriptures: "We owe to the Scripture the same reverence which we owe to God, because it has proceeded from Him alone, and it has nothing of man mixed with it."⁷ In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he insisted that the Scriptures constitute "the scepter of God,"⁸ and he clearly demonstrated his belief that God's Word should order everything in His church.

For the Reformers, then, and also for the later Puritans, the Bible was infallible and inerrant. They consistently upheld its unique authority over the church's life and mission. The

4. J. C. Ryle, *Light from Old Times* (London: Thynne & Jarvis, 1924), 71.

5. John Warwick Montgomery, *God's Inerrant Word* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), 68.

6. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 185.

7. Montgomery, *God's Inerrant Word*, 102.

8. John Calvin, prefatory address to King Francis, in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:12.

exhortation of William Tyndale was: “Without God’s Word do nothing. And to his Word add nothing; neither pull anything there from.... Serve God as he hath appointed thee.”⁹ The Puritans sought consistently to apply this principle. Whatever lacked biblical authority they declared to be ungodly and unlawful, and they disowned human inventions and traditions. Accordingly, a church began to emerge that was truly Reformed according to the Word of God.

Israel’s Pattern

The Puritans’ purification of the church certainly was supported by Scripture. In the Jewish church of the Old Testament, God’s Word was recognized as the one and only rule. In Deuteronomy 4:1–2, for example, we read the words of Moses: “Now therefore hearken, O Israel, unto the statutes and unto the judgments, which I teach you, for to do them, that ye may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers giveth you. Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.”

In consequence, Jewish church life was regulated by the Word, by which standard controversies were settled and procedures established. Any deviation from Scripture’s precise rule came under this solemn and fearful indictment: “their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men” (Isa. 29:13). The prophet summed it up well when he said, “To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it

9. William Tyndale, *Tyndale’s Doctrinal Treatises* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1848), 330.

is because there is no light in them” (Isa. 8:20). God’s Word alone regulated Israel’s belief and conduct, and warnings were given against any attempt to supplement the written Word. After stating that “every word of God is pure,” Agar solemnly declared, “Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar” (Prov. 30:5–6).

Christ’s Rule

The Lord Jesus Christ recognized Scripture’s great authority. That is clear from the account we have of His temptations. Assailed three times by Satan, He met each insidious suggestion with the words, “It is written” (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10). Later, He charged Jewish leaders with disregarding God’s Word, which they did by attaching importance to tradition (the oral law which the Jews pretended was handed down from Moses). “Why,” He pointedly asked them, “do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?” (Matt. 15:3). Our Lord knew that the sacred rule of the written Word was above human precepts and practices. In the particular context of Matthew 15, He was chiefly concerned with matters relating to worship. He said, in effect, that if in our worship we follow the teaching and example of men, we take it upon ourselves to abrogate or annul the Word of God. “Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition” (Matt. 15:6). And where does that leave us? Christ said of such people, “In vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (v. 9). Christ’s understanding was that true religion is founded on the Word of God. In worship, the only authority is such as can express itself by “Thus saith the Lord.”

The Apostles' Foundation

Christ's apostles had the same conviction. They were careful to preach and teach from God's Word. In Acts 17:2, for example, we read of Paul that "as his manner was, [he] went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures." He did not propound a philosophical theory. He did not present scientific proofs. He did not even appeal to Christian experience. What he did was to declare revealed and objective truth. He "reasoned with them out of the scriptures," and his hearers tested what they heard by recourse to that same source of authority. Later in the same chapter, we read that the Bereans "were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so" (v. 11). In other words, their nobleness of mind was evinced by their investigation of the subject by the standard of Scripture. They insisted that the new message be judged at the bar of God's Word.

The apostolic epistles show that the early churches generally were willing to subject themselves to the written Word of God. So, we have the apostle Paul ordering the affairs of the Corinthian church by what he wrote under Christ's divine authority. The Corinthians were not to be a law to themselves, as though the authoritative Word somehow proceeded from their church (1 Cor. 14:36). Instead, they were to submit to the teaching of Paul's letter, which is summed up as "the commandments of the Lord" (v. 37). Similarly, we find Paul warning against "commandments of men, that turn from the truth" (Titus 1:14), and also of the inevitable result of such departure in "will worship" (Col. 2:23), forms of worship that

proceed from human ingenuity, which chapter 3 will address in more detail.

In apostolic teaching, the Word of God is both authoritative and sufficient. Hence, we find this great statement in 2 Timothy 3:16–17: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

The Church Today

A Reformed church recognizes the Bible’s absolute authority over all its affairs. It does not acknowledge prelacy (hierarchical church government) as the source of authority; neither does it ascribe legislative power to a synod or council; such bodies have power only to apply and to obey what God has revealed in His Book. This is extremely important. The present state of evangelicalism shows there is great need to recognize that the Lord reigns through His Word (Ps. 110:2; Isa. 11:4). In His kingdom, or church, the worship, government, and practice must be according to His revealed will. No one has authority above Christ, and no one has authority alongside Him. He alone has the right to determine what will be done in His church. A Reformed church will recognize this. It will not go beyond the Word of the Lord.

God’s Transcendence

A Reformed church emphasizes the divine sovereignty, majesty, and glory, and therefore the great gulf existing between God in His transcendence and man in his sin and misery.

The opening sentence of Calvin’s *Institutes* reads, “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound

wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”¹⁰ What follows is recognition of God’s incomprehensibility, which makes Him unknown to man unless somehow He decides to make Himself known. Calvin built his entire system of theology upon this perception of God as infinitely exalted, far beyond the reach of man. In an address to commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of Calvin’s birth, Benjamin Warfield said: “It is *the vision of God and His Majesty*, in a word, which lies at the foundation of the entirety of Calvinistic thinking.... The Calvinist is the man who has seen God, and who, having seen God in His glory, is filled, on the one hand with a sense of his own unworthiness to stand in God’s sight, as a creature, and much more as a sinner, and, on the other hand, with adoring wonder that nevertheless this God is a God who receives sinners.”¹¹

This was the distinctive doctrine of the Reformation. It was present in Luther’s teaching, but it was even more prominent in Calvin’s. Believing Scripture to be the ultimate source of all true knowledge of God, Calvin sought to ascertain exactly what Scripture revealed, and thus he drew aside the veil, as it were, to show us God in all the glory of His being. “Surely,” he wrote, “his infinity ought to make us afraid to try to measure him by our own senses. Indeed, his spiritual nature forbids our imagining anything earthly or carnal of him. For the same reason, he quite often assigns himself a dwelling place in heaven.”¹²

The Westminster divines, with astonishing precision of thought and language, articulated the truth that God really is

10. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.1.

11. Benjamin B. Warfield, *Calvin as a Theologian and Calvinism Today* (Edinburgh: The Hope Trust, 1909), 15–16.

12. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.1.

God. Consider this grand and awesome statement: “God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of himself; and is alone in and unto himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which he hath made, not deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting his own glory, in, by, unto, and upon them: he is the alone foundation of being, of whom, through whom, and to whom, are all things; and hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them, whatsoever himself pleaseth.”¹³

The Scriptures’ Expression of God

The Bible lays powerful stress on the glory, majesty, and sovereignty of God. It confronts us with a God who, in His “otherness,” surpasses all the thoughts and imaginations of human minds. God is higher than the highest, “the most high God” (Gen. 14:19). The Bible refers to Him as “the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy” (Isa. 57:15). Possessing in Himself all perfection, He has everything and needs nothing. He is the one self-sufficient and all-sufficient being. To cite Paul, “who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen” (Rom. 11:35–36). There can be none like Him in the heaven above or on the earth beneath. He has neither rival nor challenger; and vain is the attempt to find any who can come anywhere near to Him in glory. In His incomparable greatness, He Himself asks the question, “To whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal?” (Isa. 40:25). George Swinnock, the Puritan, rightly concluded, “To liken

13. Westminster Confession of Faith, II, 2.

God to any is the grossest idolatry, and to liken any to God is the grossest arrogancy.”¹⁴

God’s sovereignty is therefore absolute, extending to every detail of life and history. “He doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?” (Dan. 4:35). Indeed, as David once confessed, “For the kingdom is the LORD’s: and he is the governor among the nations” (Ps. 22:28). God only is great. He wears a crown of supreme authority and almighty power. He is seated upon a throne of the highest dignity, ruling over this world, other worlds, and worlds unknown. All dominions are within His universal empire. Outside of His unchangeable and unfailing decree, nothing has ever happened, or can ever happen. Not even a sparrow, we are told, can fall to the ground without His permission and knowledge. What a God He is! His plans never fail; His actions can never be prevented. He is able to say, without fear of being contradicted, “Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand” (Isa. 14:24); and again, “My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure” (46:10).

This is true in the sphere of His saving operations. “Salvation belongeth unto the LORD” (Ps. 3:8). He determines who will be saved, and it is He who makes sinners spiritually alive, removes their ignorance and prejudice, reveals Christ to them as Savior and Lord, imparts the precious grace of faith, and then receives them into full favor and fellowship with Himself. As the apostle Paul wrote, “For by grace are ye

14. George Swinnock, *Works of George Swinnock* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1868), 4:468.

saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8–9). Surely we should bow before Him in humble submission, with contrite and humble hearts. The psalmist, after asking, “Who in the heaven can be compared unto the LORD? who among the sons of the mighty can be likened unto the LORD?,” states that, in view of His infinite glory, “God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him” (Ps. 89:6–7).

The Effect on Our Worship

In Reformed churches, the divine majesty is an article of faith, and it awakens godly fear in every act of public worship. There is orderliness in the services, and worshipers are aware that they are in the presence of Jehovah, the God of ineffable majesty. A biblical concept of God—what He is in Himself and what He is to His people—is fitted to inspire loftiest adoration and noblest praise. It certainly banishes light thoughts, flip-pant expressions, and worldly performances.

A very different atmosphere pervades the majority of modern churches. Even before the service begins, there is worldly and idle chatter. This breaks out again as soon as the service is over, effectively removing every good impression. Hearts do not appear to be devoted to the work of praise; there is careless inattentiveness to Scripture, and there is little intensity of devotion when it comes to prayer. Indeed, in not a few churches, music and group singing so dominates that the service becomes more like a concert. Tragically, there is this same ethos in some Reformed churches. Entering the building on the Sabbath day, one is confronted with styles and content of worship normally associated with modern,

Arminian, and charismatic churches. Reformed worship should be distinctive. We confess a sovereign God. Our veneration for Him should be demonstrated in the way we make our approach to Him. It should always be in a serious manner and with reverential fear.

The Way of Salvation

A Reformed church proclaims God's scheme of salvation, which is plainly set forth in the doctrines of free, sovereign, and distinguishing grace. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, an important controversy took place in the Reformed churches of the Netherlands. Jacob Arminius (1560–1609), who had studied at Geneva, began to express views contrary to Scripture and the Reformed faith. As professor of theology at the University of Leyden, Arminius delivered a series of lectures on predestination, and many of the students who imbibed his novel and unorthodox views began to agitate for changes in the confession of faith and in the catechism. These men became known as the Remonstrants. In a document they called a "Remonstrance," they set forth their opinions under five heads:

1. God elected to save those who believe on the Son.
2. Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, died for all men and every man.
3. Man needed to be born again of God in Christ. This, of course, was true enough.
4. The operation of divine grace is not irresistible.
5. According to some, those in Christ by a true faith may possibly become once again devoid of grace.

In 1618–1619, a General Synod was held at Dordrecht, with representatives (eighty-four in all) from the Netherlands, Great Britain, Germany, and Switzerland. The Synod began its sessions on November 13, 1618, and, after careful consideration of the Scripture, it dealt with the five articles of the Remonstrants, setting forth under five heads the true doctrine of God’s Word:

1. Election is not based on foreseen faith but on God’s good pleasure.
2. God, through the death of His Son, has effectually redeemed only those who from eternity were chosen to salvation.
3. and 4. Apart from regenerating grace, sinners are neither able nor willing to return to God, but all those in whom God works in this way are unfailingly regenerated and do actually believe.
5. Through undeserved mercy, believers are secure against the complete loss of faith and grace, and do not continue in backsliding so as finally to perish.

The Synod’s five leading doctrines later became known as the five points of Calvinism. They are usually presented as follows.

Total Depravity

As a result of the Fall, people are totally alienated from God, subject to the corrupting power of sin, and in a totally helpless position: “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). Such is the human state that people cannot will or do anything spiritual; they certainly cannot believe or repent. Christ said, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him” (John 6:44), and early Jewish believers recognized that

“God [hath] also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life” (Acts 11:18). This doctrine does not mean that people are as bad as they can possibly be. Rather, it means that we have been corrupted in the totality of our beings, so that every faculty has been impaired. Mind, heart, and will have all been adversely and tragically affected by sin. We are evidently therefore “without strength” (Rom. 5:6). As Paul made clear in Romans 9, this means that in the matter of salvation, “It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy” (v. 16).

Unconditional Election

God’s electing of a people is the eternal expression of His mercy and grace. God, who willed to permit the Fall, determined to rescue some from their sin and misery. Had He not done so, the whole human race would have perished under divine judgment like Sodom and Gomorrah (Rom. 9:29). It was therefore an election to salvation. That is exactly what Paul said in his letter to the Thessalonians: “We are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation” (2 Thess. 2:13). This was according to God’s own good pleasure, not according to anything foreseen in men and women. This is taught in passages of Scripture such as Ephesians 1:5. Elsewhere, the apostle categorically denied that God chooses sinners on the grounds of works foreseen. In Romans 9, for example, he said concerning Jacob and Esau that “the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil,” God showed His sovereign preference for Jacob in order that “the purpose of God according to election might stand” (v. 11).

Election is gracious. It is never deserved. God did not foresee that certain individuals would repent and believe, and then upon that basis, elect them to eternal life. That would make His choice dependent upon merit, whereas election is by God's free favor: "Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then it is no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace" (Rom. 11:5–6). In His eternal decree, God viewed mankind as fallen and ruined. He determined, in His own mind, to show mercy to multitudes, while justly leaving others to the consequences of the Fall. Instead of questioning this doctrine, we should fall before the throne in praise and thanksgiving, for if God had not elected some, every single soul would face a dark and fearful eternity. As it is, multitudes upon multitudes will be in the kingdom of heaven, to the glory of sovereign grace!

Limited Atonement

This point, sometimes called *particular atonement*, teaches that the Son redeemed those elected by the Father. In other words, Christ did not die for everyone, but only for the chosen people of God. Christ's own statement was "the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep" (John 10:11; see also v. 15). He would never have said that He gives His life for the goats. In Acts 20:28, Paul told the Ephesian elders to look after God's church, "which he hath purchased with his own blood." So, what has been bought? What now is the Lord's special possession: the whole human race, or the chosen part of it? The answer to all these questions is—the church!

We are told that the glorified in heaven sing this new song: "Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God

by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation” (Rev. 5:9). Let me state the obvious. They are not singing that He redeemed every kindred, tongue, people, and nation, but that he redeemed *us* out of every kindred, tongue, people, and nation. Christ died to save the elect. His was *particular* redemption.

Effectual Calling

Since by reason of sin we have lost the ability to will and do any spiritual good, we cannot even answer the call of mercy in the gospel. God therefore calls us not only by His Word, but also by His Spirit, who powerfully draws us to Christ that we might be saved. “No man can come to me,” Jesus said, “except the Father which hath sent me draw him” (John 6:44). As Paul was careful to explain, “There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling” (Eph. 4:4).

Is the Spirit’s work always effectual? Yes, it certainly is. There is a great verse in Romans which says, “Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified” (8:30). Who, then, are the “called”? Are they all those people who hear the gospel of Christ? No! Looking back, they are those who were predestinated; and looking forward, they are those who will be justified, and ultimately glorified. This calling, peculiar to the elect, is God’s way of saving people in time and for eternity. Accordingly, we find that to be *called* (in this sense) is nothing more nor less than to be *saved*. The words are used interchangeably, as in 1 Corinthians 1, where the gospel is said, on the one hand, to be “the power of God” to the “saved,” and on the other hand, “the power of God” to the “called” (vv. 18, 24). The calling is viewed as all one with

being brought into a state of salvation, and so the apostle can write in another place: “[God] hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling” (2 Tim. 1:9). How indebted we all are to this sovereign and irresistible call, which does not simply invite, but graciously brings us to Christ!

John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* contains a helpful little illustration. In the Interpreter’s House, Christiana encounters a hen and its chicks. The Interpreter points out that the hen “had a *common* call, and that she hath all day long”; but he goes on to say that she also “had a *special* call, and that she had but sometimes” (italics added). We have all observed a mother hen clucking in such a way that her chicks come running to her. This shows us the different ways in which the Lord deals with men and women. When He calls in a general way in the gospel, sinners will not come to Him, but when He calls them effectually by His Spirit, they come running, to find their refuge under the shadow of His wings. As Bunyan’s Interpreter says, “by his common call he gives nothing,” whereas “by his special call, he always has something to give.”¹⁵

Perseverance of the Saints

True believers will never totally or finally fall away. They will continue in faith and holiness to the end of their lives. “The righteous also shall hold on his way, and he that hath clean hands shall be stronger and stronger” (Job 17:9). This is not because of anything in them. Rather, it is because God will carry on the work of grace to completion: “He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of

15. John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, in *Works* (Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1854), 3:186.

Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6). God has no intention of abandoning His people, nor of forsaking the work of His hands. “The author” of their faith will also be its “finisher” (Heb. 12:2). Why? Because “the gifts and calling of God are without repentance” (Rom. 11:29). God does not bestow grace for a temporary purpose. He will never withdraw it and leave a soul to perish. Believers are therefore eternally safe and secure. Christ said, “I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand” (John 10:28).

God’s Covenant of Grace

A Reformed church understands that a covenant is at the heart of God’s relationship with man. Therefore, Reformed churches emphasize the unfolding and developing of God’s covenant of grace. John Murray called covenant theology “a distinguishing feature of the reformed tradition.”¹⁶

Biblically speaking, a covenant is an arrangement into which God enters for the benefit of men and women. The Reformers recognized the importance of this concept, and made free use of it in their sermons and writings. The doctrine of the covenant is found seminally in Calvin’s *Institutes*, but those who came after him developed it. In 1561, Zacharius Ursinus, a professor at Heidelberg, referred to a covenant God made with Adam before the Fall, and in 1576, Ursinus’s colleague Caspar Olevianus taught that there was another covenant which was fulfilled in Christ to the everlasting salvation of God’s elect people.

16. John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 4:216.

The Covenants of Works and Grace

There are two covenants that relate to eternal life. They are usually referred to as the *covenant of works* and the *covenant of grace*, the former being that bond established with Adam, the representative of mankind, and the latter being the bond established from eternity with the Son of God, the representative and surety of God's elect.

God entered into the covenant of works with Adam soon after his creation (Gen. 2:16–17; see also Hos. 6:7 margin). The *condition* of this covenant was Adam's personal and perfect obedience—that is, his works. This obedience was tested by the command not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. But alongside the condition was the *penalty* of death, which included physical, spiritual, and eternal death (Rom. 5:12; 6:23); by implication, there was the *promise* of life, in the same three forms and culminating in eternal life (Matt. 19:16–17; Rom. 7:10). We know that Adam, by sinning, breached that covenant, plunging himself and all his posterity into ruin: “As by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that [or, in whom] all have sinned” (Rom. 5:12).

In His great kindness, God revealed, almost at once, the existence of another covenant: the covenant of grace. He had made this arrangement in eternity with the Son of God (Gal. 3:17; Eph. 3:11), who was then appointed “the last Adam” or “the second [representative] man” (1 Cor. 15:45, 47). Its condition was also obedience, but this was to be not just active obedience in life; it was also to be passive obedience in suffering and death, to answer for the sin of the broken covenant. Hence, the Son was obliged to “fulfil all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15). He had to be “obedient unto death” (Phil. 2:8). That the

condition would be met was never in doubt, so no penalty was associated with this covenant. God declared that He would honor the promise, and bestow the gift of eternal life to His incarnate Son and to every one of His people (Titus 1:2; 1 John 5:11). In the fullness of time, Christ—the mediator of the new covenant—succeeded where Adam had miserably failed. He could say, “I restored that which I took not away” (Ps. 69:4).

When, by faith, sinners unite with Christ, their head and representative, they are incorporated into this saving covenant and obtain its blessing for time and eternity. “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). The divine purpose in giving us the Scriptures is to reveal this glorious covenant of grace, in various typical covenants (see, for example, Gen. 9:8–17; 17:1–14; Ex. 24:1–8) and supremely in the gospel of Christ (Isa. 55:3; Luke 1:68–72; Heb. 10:15–25). How this doctrine magnifies divine grace! God was not obliged to have dealings with man, or to bless him in any way whatsoever, and yet in His amazing grace He made an arrangement in Christ which issues in a life of eternal blessedness.

Edward Payson, the American Congregational minister, wrote to his mother in 1812. He had been thinking privately about the wonders of God’s grace, and in this particular letter, he expressed some profound thoughts on that subject. He wrote:

Never before did the scheme of redemption, and the great mystery of God manifest in the flesh, appear so great and glorious. While meditating upon it, I was wonderfully struck with a reason, which never occurred to me before, why God permitted Adam to fall. Had he stood, all his posterity would have been happy. He would, therefore,

in one sense, have been their Saviour; and while they were enjoying the happiness of heaven, they would have exclaimed, “For all this we are indebted to our first parent.” This would have been too great an honour for any finite being. It would have tempted Adam to pride, and us to idolatry. The honour, therefore, was reserved for God’s own Son, the second Adam. But perhaps this has occurred to you before; so I will not enlarge.¹⁷

Covenant theology exalts the glory of the Redeemer. It teaches the necessity of faith—that is, union with Him. For while we have a natural union with Adam, who brought us ruin and despair, we need a spiritual union with Christ, which will bring us life forevermore. If through faith we are one with Christ, everything He has is made over to us. And this includes, of course, His great salvation. Amazing though it is, spiritual paupers and debtors are now made the beneficiaries of rich, free grace and inheritors of a heavenly and everlasting kingdom.

An Experience of Grace

A Reformed church stresses the need for an inward, spiritual experience of God’s saving grace, which creates such gratitude that believers readily follow the law as the rule of life. Luther entered an Augustinian monastery determined to live under the rules that regulated the whole of his life. Why did he become a monk? In his own heart, he felt the need for peace and hope. As he would later say, “If ever a monk could win heaven by monkery, I must have reached it.”¹⁸ Dr. Staupitz, the

17. Edward Payson, *A Memoir of the Rev. Edward Payson* (London: Seeley & Burnside, 1830), 235–36.

18. Thomas M. Lindsay, *Luther and the German Reformation* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1908), 34.

prior of the Augustinians, insisted that every monk read the Scriptures. Luther began to study the epistle to the Romans. Later, he told movingly of his conversion to Christ:

I sought day and night to make out the meaning of Paul, and at last I came to apprehend it thus: through the gospel is revealed the righteousness which availeth with God—a righteousness by which God, in his mercy and compassion, justifieth us; as it is written, “The just shall live by faith.” Straightway I felt as if I were born anew. It was as if I had found the door of Paradise thrown wide open. Now I saw the Scriptures altogether in a new light.... The expression, “the righteousness of God,” which I so much hated before, now became dear and precious—my darling and comforting word. That passage of Paul was to me the true door of Paradise.¹⁹

That is Reformed experience. It is something that is known and felt. Today, I fear, there is a great deal of intellectual Calvinism. Many people have book learning and head knowledge. But Reformed Christianity emphasizes the need to be inwardly taught. It emphasizes the things of the heart. It is possible for a mere professor of faith to know the doctrines of grace. The vital thing is to know “the grace of God in truth” (Col. 1:6; see also Eph. 1:13). True believers know something of Christ’s love-visits (John 14:23; 16:22), times when He seems particularly near. His presence then stirs our graces, and our hearts thrill at the sound of His voice. We begin to feel the gracious influences of His Spirit. In those precious moments, the secrets of love are shared in real communion. This is heaven upon earth.

19. Lindsay, *Luther and the Reformation*, 36–37.

Now, *felt* grace does not destroy a believer's obligation to keep the law; rather, it strengthens that obligation, supplying new motives, abilities, and encouragements. The great English Puritan Richard Sibbes once observed that Christ's love "hath a constraining, a sweet violence to put us upon all duties, to suffer, to do, to resist anything."²⁰ Through the blessed ministry of the Holy Spirit, the believer's heart is inclined and drawn forth to obey God's holy laws. The promise is, "I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts" (Heb. 8:10), and the fulfilment is in that change which enables a sinner to say, "I delight in the law of God after the inward man" (Rom. 7:22).

So, is the law a rule of life for believers? Undoubtedly it is! The apostle was able to describe himself as "not without law to God, but under the law to Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21). In other words, as one of Christ's redeemed sinners, Paul felt himself indispensably bound to the moral law of God. Reformed believers regard the law neither as a means of justification nor as a means of condemnation. It is simply the rule of their duty.

Proclamation of the Gospel

A Reformed church is committed to the work of bringing the gospel of salvation to the unconverted, not only in its own vicinity but also in other areas of the country and in other parts of the world. Historically, reformation and evangelism have gone hand in hand.

In 1559, Protestants in Sweden took the gospel to the people of Lapland, and in 1562, French Protestants evangelized

20. Richard Sibbes, *The Works of Richard Sibbes* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1862), 2:74.

Florida and, afterwards, Carolina. In 1566, the church in Geneva sent fourteen missionaries to spread the Christian faith in South America. Later, the Pilgrim Fathers became missionaries. Arriving at New Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1620, they soon organized a mission to promote the conversion of the Indians.

It is the duty of the church to evangelize. Among Christ's last words to His disciples were those recorded in Matthew's gospel: "Go ye therefore, and teach [or, make disciples of] all nations" (Matt. 28:19; see also v. 20; Mark 16:15–16; Luke 24:46–49; John 20:21–22). The book of Acts describes how His Great Commission was fulfilled. His believing people took the gospel from Jerusalem to other parts of Judea, then into regions inhabited by the Samaritans, and finally out to the very ends of the earth. This matter is no side issue. It is our great work to tell out the glories of God as they are displayed in the grand scheme of redemption. Why? Because only in this way will the divine purpose be fulfilled and "the earth...be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14; see also Isa. 11:9). Preaching only in chapel buildings cannot realize this great vision. Christ's way is to "send forth labourers" (Matt. 9:38; see also John 15:16). As the apostle Paul said, "the word of the Lord" must have "free course," speeding its way throughout the whole world, if it is to be "glorified" in the revelation of its glorious truths and in the performing of its glorious works (2 Thess. 3:1).

Consecration of Life

A Reformed church will encourage the spirit of true devotion, which will find expression in lives wholly consecrated to God. Calvin's emblem was a hand holding out a heart to God, and

his motto was, "I offer my heart to God as a sacrifice." Writing of the Christian life, Calvin remarked, "We are not our own, we belong to the Lord. We are not our own. Let our reasons and our wills then never predominate in our thinking and in our acting.... Let us then forget ourselves as much as is possible."²¹

That is the spirit of the Reformation. Those possessing it are willing to be mastered by God. What does the New Testament say? "For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's" (Rom. 14:8). In another epistle, we read, "Ye are not your own.... Ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Cor. 6:19–20). If a church is really biblical and Reformed, its members will be fully committed to Christ. The time has come for self-examination. Do we sincerely love the Lord? What kind of service do we offer Him? My friends, could it be that we are Reformed in name only?

21. Jean Cadier, *The Man God Mastered* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1960), 105.