

Issues in Reformed Theology

The Order of the Church

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1. A review of the meaning of Reformed

Before we look at Reformed churches in particular, we must review the meaning of “reformed.” Many churches consider themselves to be Reformed but do not hold to the historical doctrines of Reformed churches. This is most notably true with the contemporary rise of Reformed Baptist churches. More and more people are considering themselves “Reformed” who do not accept the historic Reformed Confessions: the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, or the Canons of Dort in their totality.

For Reformed Baptist churches, “Reformed” has focused upon the doctrines of grace in salvation. None of them, by definition, hold to the Reformed doctrine of infant baptism. Few agree with the Reformed doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, there is much disagreement with end times theology. Another difference is in the doctrine of the church, where Reformed Baptists view the Church consisting of autonomous local churches.

Therefore, our class on Issues in Reformed Theology includes topics that Reformed Baptists would not agree with. This class on Church Order is another area where Reformed churches hold specific beliefs that affect their practice of biblical ministry.

So in a broad sense, “reformed” is a descriptive term referring to the Calvinistic doctrine of salvation and God’s sovereignty in election. In a narrower sense, “reformed” is a title used to identify those subscribing to certain historically reformed confessions of faith. This more formal sense in regard to Reformed people and churches is necessarily denominational.

The term is even more confusing because Reformed churches that hold to the confessional statements fall into two broad categories: (1) Presbyterian and (2) Reformed. So there are churches that are complete “reformed” that are identified as Presbyterian and those that use the title “Reformed.” Both are equally Reformed in a theological sense.

Finally, most churches that have the word “reformed” in their title have become theologically liberal over time. The Reformed Church in America is largest of the denominations with “Reformed” in their name and is quite theologically liberal. Thus they are not holding to the historic confessions in their practice. This would be also true of the largest Presbyterian denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA). These and many other denominations are “reformed” in name more than in doctrine.

2. The Reformed denominations

Reformed denominations fall into two distinct categories. The first broad group of Reformed churches that hold to the specific historic confessions of faith are Presbyterian. Churches that are Presbyterian are historically rooted in Great Britain (mostly in Scotland and Ireland) and hold most firmly to the English Westminster Confession of Faith.

The second broad group of Reformed churches that hold to the specific historic confessions of faith are Reformed. These Reformed Churches were established from continental Europe (particularly among the Dutch, Swiss and German people) and hold primarily to the “Three Forms of Unity” (the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort).

Within Presbyterianism and Reformed Churches there has developed a great many denominations, mostly small in size. This came about primarily due to disagreement. Some denominations later united with other denominations so the history is fairly involved. We will look only at the largest of these denominations.

In addition to official denominations, pastors have established Reformed organizations in recent years. Some are primarily Reformed Baptist, such as the Fellowship of Independent Reformed Evangelicals (FIRE, founded in 2000), and the Association of Reformed Baptist Churches in America (ARBCA, founded in 1997). Others include both Reformed Baptist pastors and more traditional Reformed and Presbyterian pastors. Examples are Gospel Coalition (founded 2005), the Acts 29 Network (founded in 1998). These organizations are influential but they do not actually lead churches.

Historically, Reformed denominations have splintered over a number of issues including the Great Awakening of the 18th century, slavery, liberalism, ecumenism, and women’s roles in the church. The clearest way to look at these denominations today is through the lens of liberalism. Most Presbyterians and Reformed denominations of size allow women to teach and exercise authority over men (contra 1 Timothy 2:12). Below is a list that includes the largest of the more conservative Presbyterians and Reformed denominations:

- The Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC, 273 churches), founded by J. Gresham Machen in a split with the PCUSA over liberalism in the 1930s.
- The United Reformed Churches of North America (URCNA, 106 churches) formed from a division with the Christian Reformed Church in North America in response to liberal theological beliefs. The URCNA has discussed merging with the smaller Canadian and American Reformed Churches (CanRC, 55 churches)
- The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA, 100 churches), which is most distinctive by their adherence to a cappella singing of Psalms only in their worship service.

- The Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARPC, 296 churches), notable as the denomination of Jay Adams, the founder of the modern biblical counseling movement.
- The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA, 1,912 churches), which is the largest and most influential conservative Presbyterian denomination and formed in 1973 from a division over theological liberalism from two Presbyterian denominations that a decade later formed the largest and most liberal Presbyterian denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA). Notable pastors among the PCA have included James Montgomery Boice, D. James Kennedy (founder of Evangelism Explosion), Tim Keller, Ligon Duncan, and R. C. Sproul.

3. The Reformed organization

One notable distinction of Presbyterian and Reformed denominations is that they are not independent. The concept of independent, autonomous local churches is a Baptist concert, not a Reformed one. As the Reformation grew and churches united around Calvinism, church was only thought of in the context of the hierarchical organization of the Roman Catholic Church. The view of a Pope was strongly opposed by Reformers and the biblical view of a plurality of leadership was implemented in Reformed Churches, in connection with the government. This view of church government has continued up to the present.

In general, there is a large degree of similarity among Presbyterian and Reformed churches regarding their church government. Local churches have elders and deacons. Based upon 1 Timothy 5:17, elders are typically divided between “teaching elders” (considered to be ministers and are ordained), and “ruling elders” (who may also be ordained). Each local church makes decisions through the governing body called the “session” (in Presbyterian churches) or “consistory” (in Reformed churches). The session is typically comprised of the teaching and ruling elders.

The ruling authority over the local church is a regional body called the “presbytery” (in Presbyterian churches) or “classis” (in Reformed churches), consisting of representatives from churches and others (such as a seminary professor, a chaplain or a retired minister). In addition to its oversight, this group will ordain ministers for the role of teaching elder.

Larger denominations use the same type of oversight body for the presbyteries, known as synods. The Presbyterian Church in America and the Orthodox Protestant Church have not adopted this intermediate layer of government. The ruling body over the entire denomination is the General Assembly, consisting of representatives of the presbyteries.

The significance of this is that the local church is limited in its ability to govern itself. It does not have the authority to unilaterally withdraw from the denomination. This has been a problem as denominations drift toward theological liberalism. Churches that have sought to maintain biblical integrity have had to begin entirely new denominations due to their view of church government and must negotiate their exit with the presbytery.

4. The Reformed Confessions

The emphasis on organization and formality among Reformed Churches will affect local churches. Beyond the Bible itself, the churches use the confessions as a subordinate source of authoritative teaching. These confessions were never intended to replace or to compete with the Bible but serve to complement the teaching of Scripture by attempting to ensure doctrinal integrity among church to a theological system. The degree to which adherence to these confessions is required will depend upon how doctrinally driven the denomination is.

Confessional statements did not begin with the Reformation. Beyond statements from individuals, there were statements from church leaders collectively, beginning with the Nicene Creed (325 AD). As years went on many councils would convene and issue statements in creedal form. These statements gradually grew longer over time, from several long sentences of the Nicene Creed to hundreds of pages produced by the Council of Trent (1563 AD). It ought not to surprise us to know the Reformed confessional statements were not short.

a. The Three Forms of Unity

The Three Forms of Unity is the collective title for three historic confessional statements that governed the Reformed churches on the European continent. They represent the theology of Calvinism.

1) The Belgic Confession (1561)

The Belgic Confession originated in the low countries of modern day Belgium and the Netherlands. Representatives of Philip II of Spain persecuted the Reformed church in the lowlands of Northern Europe and believers sent this Confession to demonstrate that they were not rebels and were willing to obey the government in all lawful areas. The commitment of these men to “offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to fire” rather than deny the truth of God's Word.

It is a broad based theological treatment of the basic doctrines of the Christian faith from a Reformed perspective. It consists of thirty-seven articles, some a paragraph long and some several paragraphs long, each declaring a personal “we believe.” This doctrinal statement did not change the persecution as its chief author, Guido de Bres, was martyred a few years later.

2) The Heidelberg Catechism (1563)

The Heidelberg Catechism is comprised of 129 questions and answers in three sections: the misery of man, the redemption of man, and the gratitude due from man. It was designed to be used sequentially on each Sunday of the year in order to teach Christian doctrine. It was composed in Heidelberg in present day Germany and was accepted for use in the years following throughout Reformed churches.

3) The Canons of Dort

The full title of the Canons of Dort is “The Decision of the Synod of Dort on the Five Main Points of Doctrine in Dispute in the Netherlands.” The synod convened in response to The Remonstrance, published in 1610 to advance Arminianism. The eighteen page Canon of Dort is specifically written in 1618-1619 to reject Arminian Theology.

It built upon the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism, which were widely used among Dutch churches of the early seventeenth century. Each served a specific purpose. The Confession was general theological instruction, the Catechism was designed to explain the Christian faith to newcomers and children, and the Canons were detailed theological responses to the issues of the nature of salvation.

b. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)

The Westminster Confession of Faith came out from the English Civil War (1642-1649), fought between those loyal to the Charles I, King of England, Scotland and Ireland and those of the English Parliament. To secure the alliance with Scottish leaders against the king, the Westminster assembly chose for the Church of England to abandon Episcopalianism for Calvinism. A group of theologians who were part of the English Parliament wrote the Confession, which was ratified by the English and Scottish parliaments because of this political setting for its creation.

The Westminster Confession was built upon orthodox Christian doctrines and the teaching of Protestant Reformation, including the Three Forms of Unity. It consists of 33 chapters and is around 325 pages in length. The American denominations have made certain edits such as no longer considering the Pope to be the Anti-Christ, removing the role of the state in church matters and as well as certain teaching on oaths.

In addition, the Westminster assembly wrote Larger and Shorter Catechisms, which have been also adopted as doctrinal standards for Presbyterian churches. These were written to bring the English and Scottish churches into closer conformity. The Larger Catechism is a series of 196 questions and answers designed to develop Christian ministers. The Shorter Catechism is a series of 107 questions and answers designed for weak Christians and children.

Beyond the Confession and Catechisms, there was the Directory for Public Worship and the Form of Church Government. The documents together comprise the “Westminster Standards.” Today, the Book of Church Order has replaced the Directory for Public Worship and the Form of Church Government. For example, the Presbyterian Church of America’s Book of Church Order is 400 pages long.

Clearly, the divisions within the Presbyterian and Reformed denominations testify to the inadequacy of confessional statement to protect the church from theological error. Pages upon pages of instruction are unable to protect against the sin of man against the Bible. We cannot expect faithfulness from the establishment of well crafted statements.

5. The regulative principle of worship

The “regulative principle of worship” is the Reformed view that the worship of God in a church service must be founded upon specific directions from the Scripture. This was taught by John Calvin who wrote, “God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His word.” This is in contrast to Martin Luther who held the perspective that aspects of the Catholic Mass that were not expressly forbidden in the Scripture were permissible. This bolstered Luther’s desire to not change any more than the Bible demanded from the Church experience of those he ministered too.

Calvin and other Reformers saw the Catholic Mass as idolatrous and sought a more total reconstruction of the church service. This led to the regulative principle of only doing what the Scripture calls for in the worship service. The Westminster Confession of Faith promotes the regulative principle in writing, “but the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited to his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.” The Confession also lists several biblical ordinances of religious worship:

- The reading of the Scriptures
- The preaching and hearing of the Word
- Singing of psalms
- The due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments
- Religious oaths and vows
- Solemn fastings and thanksgivings

Scriptural basis for declaring that church worship can only consist of specifically approved means is claimed from Exodus 25:40 and the instructions for the tabernacle, and stories of judgment of pagan worship in the Old Testament (Genesis 4:3-4; Leviticus 10). Exodus 20:3-4 is used to say we must avoid other gods and idols. Obviously this presumes that including something outside of the Scripture into the worship service is tantamount to idolatry.

New Testament passages used to support the regulative principle include the prohibition of Jesus regarding the teaching of the precepts of men as doctrines of God (Matthew 15:9), and that the Scripture is sufficient for “all things that pertain to life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). The need for order in the church is appealed to (1 Corinthians 14). This presumes that including something outside of the Scripture into the worship service is tantamount to false teaching, false sanctification and disorder.

Certainly, conservative Bible-believing churches would like to view their worship service as biblically based. Most would give hearty agreement to the need for the Scripture to direct what is included in the worship service. But there is active disagreement regarding what is allowable and appropriate. The regulative principle does not solve this disagreement since there are significant differences among churches that profess agreement with the principle.

Furthermore, it is obvious that more things happen in every Presbyterian church than is specified in the Bible. How are all these things justified? The Westminster Confession also says, “there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.” So there is allowance for accommodations to be made.

As with many Reformed practices, there is no direct Scripture that directly supports the belief in the regulative principle of worship. There are only applications of Bible texts that are used to direct the worship in Reformed churches. So it is actually those holding to the regulative principle that are teaching the precepts of men as doctrines of God by forbidding what God himself has not expressly prohibited.

Many Reformed teachers recognize the weak Scriptural basis for the regulative principle of worship and look to reasoning to argue its necessity. The one common argument has been to note that the believer is obligated to attend church on Sunday and therefore churches may only require them to do what the Scripture requires of them for they are a captive audience.

Of course it is always wrong to require people to do something that is sinful so sin must never be practiced in a worship service. Regarding the freedom of choices in worship that are not sinful, each church must choose their practices. If a church member’s conscience so restricts his participation, he is free to participate in a different church. Every church makes decisions regarding the worship service and it behooves us to have an accurate view of what God allows. We cannot worship idols but our culture necessarily influences our practices and we ought to be able to observe areas of freedom in the Christian life, including our worship style.

In the end, the regulative principle sounds objective but in practice is truly subjective. Some churches will employ singing only from the Psalms without instruments on the basis of this principle. Some churches will allow certain instruments but oppose a praise band. Some churches will oppose drama but allow the person teaching the word to utilize dramatic presentation. Some churches allow electronics in terms of lighting and amplification but oppose electronics in terms of slides or video. The application of “some circumstances concerning the worship of God...are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence” is from the eye of the beholder only.

The alternative to the regulative principle of worship is the normative principle of worship. Scripture is upheld as the standard for worship and all things forbidden must not be practiced in a church service. But beyond what is prohibited there is freedom within the bounds of wisdom in serving the Lord and the congregation in worship. The peace and unity of the church must be served. Most Evangelical churches would hold to the normative principle of worship and this view of Protestant worship can be found as early as the Lutheran Augsburg Confession (1530) which stated “of usages in the Church they teach that those ought to be observed which may be observed without sin and which are profitable unto tranquility and good order in the Church.”

Both sides of this debate regarding worship have convictions regarding what is appropriate and what is inappropriate in church worship. Those holding to the regulative principle of worship attempt to use an artificial extra-biblical means to eliminate what they do not want in worship. Until the time when they do want it, and then they are able to appeal to the caveat that it is “to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence.” Thus the regulative principle is just as unable to regulate what people want to do as the normative principle.

6. Conclusion

If Reformed churches are anything, they are organized and ordered. The order of the church is found in every Reformed denomination, large and small, for its authority structure brings order. From the denominational structure, to the confessional statements, to the catechisms to the book of church order, to the conduct of the worship service, all is orderly.

The result of the Reformed approach to organization is a high degree of formality, in comparison to most Evangelical churches. Deviations are possible, but the structure does not make change easy. The structure has bred an intellectualism and seriousness of practice in the Reformed Christian life. The formalism has led to the appearance of deadness, which accounts for the nickname of “the frozen chosen.”

Our next class will look at the function of the church and how the beliefs and the organization have formed in the practice of ministry in Reformed churches.