

Issues in Reformed Theology

The Function of the Church

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When you look at a theological system that spans dozens of denominations of good size with thousands of churches (even omitting the liberal churches), it is difficult to discuss how they function in a completely representative fashion. There are many churches that will fall outside the norm within denominations. However, while this class may not be able to accurately speak to each church or each person's experience, there are generalities that allow us to observe how doctrine affects practice in Reformed churches.

The most fundamental function in churches occurs in the corporate worship service. All churches have a worship service, and Reformed churches base theirs on the regulative principle of worship, which we addressed in our last class. The challenge of generalizing about church function exists even with regard to regulative principle that on the surface appears to unite Reformed churches together on what is appropriate in worship.

This desire to regulate worship among Reformed churches is active. When a Reformed church delves into areas that appear to fall outside of the prescription of the Scripture, there is sure to be concern, certainly in the more conservative churches. This explains why Reformed churches have been more resistant to contemporary music, certain instruments, and forms of worship that have not been historically practiced. This feeds into more uniformity in worship among churches in their liturgy.

1. The liturgy of Reformed worship services

In one sense, every church has a "liturgy" in that there is some plan to the worship service. Even in informal churches, there is a plan and an order even if it is not apparent. Order in a worship service is a positive thing by all accounts. However, in common usage, liturgy speaks to church services with a higher degree of formality, not just a plan for the service.

Formality in a worship service occurs in various ways. For example, a view of the order of events that discourages deviation lends to formality. The timing of the service in terms of punctuality is a part of a more formal culture. Attire plays a part of this as well and the adornment of the church itself.

Many conservative Reformed churches find their pastors wearing robes. This is typically done with the view that a robe communicates the authority of God. Certainly this elevates the role of the minister, adding to the distinction between the professional clergy and the non-professional laymen, and impinging upon a central tenant for the Reformation in the priesthood of the believers (1 Peter 2:9).

Generally speaking, conservative Reformed churches are more liturgical and formal than most other Evangelical churches. Typically there are many aspects to Reformed worship practices and there exists variety from church to church. But a general description of a Reformed worship service gives us a sense of how the Reformed traditions and beliefs have influenced the function of ministry. This Reformed view of the “Lord’s Day” adds to the significance of the liturgy since participation is commanded.

In addition to the teaching, musical and sacramental parts of the Reformed worship service, there are other parts of the liturgy that are common to many if not most Reformed churches. While the structure of worship in Reformed churches may vary and even different terms might be used, here are examples that are included:

- An invocation. This is a public petition to God for His blessing on the worship.
- A call to worship
- The doxology
- Confession: A corporate confession of sin, often including responsive readings.
- Scripture readings: Based upon 1 Timothy 4:13, the view is this is obligatory.
- The reading of a portion of creedal statement or catechism.
- The offertory

Most Reformed churches have a detailed order of the service, often printed for the congregation to follow. This adds to the sense of structure and uniformity. For many this becomes a form of familiarity and comfort. It can be so valued that it migrates to churches that are not part of a Reformed denomination.

The Reformed liturgy had become adopted by churches that are not part of any Reformed denomination but are Reformed in a Baptist sense and even Charismatic. An example is Bob Kauflin who notes about the worship service, “we started occasionally using elements like responsive readings, pre-written prayers, public confession of sin, and creeds.” In many different types of Calvinistic churches, catechisms, creeds, and the use scripted prayers is not uncommon.

Interestingly, and in contrast to some Reformed practices today, those who prepared the Westminster Confession of Faith also published a Directory of Public Worship in 1645 in order to replace the Church of England’s Book of Common Prayer. Its purpose was to provide direction for worship, not to provide a liturgy that was to be followed. This was to counter the practice of the Church of England, whose worship service was heavily influenced by Roman Catholicism.

The Directory of Public Worship viewed the prayer book as detrimental to true worship and saw the reading of prescribed prayers as far too perfunctory. It intentionally did not produce a set form to be followed. It avoided the use of responsive readings, the doxology, the frequent use of the Lord’s Prayer or other prayers, and the use of ancient creeds. It promoted the Scripture and the teaching of the Scripture, rather than open acts of worship.

In spite of this attempt to reduce liturgy and formalism, it has challenged the Christian church throughout its history. What is meaningful for people in one place and in one time, becomes empty to others. Just as some Christians view informality as leading to a more personal relationship with God, other Christians view formalness as leading to greater holiness and reverence. Of course neither is intrinsically true as this perception is viewed from man's point of view. But there is a strong tendency toward a liturgy that is understood as important for true worship and advanced as such to those inside and outside of the church.

In other words, there is hardly a view in Reformed churches that the form of their worship is "just the way they do it." There is a clear sense that it is planned according to Scriptural direction. Those unaware may listen to the rhetoric of the need for a high view of God and begin to incorporate doxologies, prayers, responsive readings, creeds, and catechisms, with a desire to elevate the Lord in a worship service. In the process, the church takes a step down the well-traveled path of meaningless repetition that Christ warned of (Matthew 6:7).

2. The Sabbath

a. The Reformed view of the Sabbath

In our earlier class on Covenant Theology, we discussed the Reformed method of dealing with the Old Testament Law that divides it between the "moral," "ceremonial" and "civil" laws. Rather than viewing the Law of Moses as given to the nation of Israel, Reformed theology views the Law as continuing in its moral form to govern the church, which is the "New Israel." Under Reformed theology, the fourth commandment to keep the Sabbath holy is a moral command.

R. C. Sproul's Ligonier Ministries has posted the following in answer to the question of whether we are to keep the Sabbath holy: "In the New Testament the church comes together on the Lord's Day, which is the first day of the week, for corporate worship. We have a clear mandate in the New Testament not to forsake the assembling of the saints (Hebrews 10:25). In other words, the New Testament's simple language says that Christians are supposed to be in corporate worship on the Lord's Day. That means we're supposed to go to church. That is usually seen as one of the ways in which the Sabbath is to be observed. All Christians I know of who believe that the Sabbath is still in effect agree that on the Sabbath we should be worshiping, and also that on one day in seven there should be rest from unnecessary commerce and labor. There are still provisions for commerce that must go on—hospital work, pharmacies, and such. But commerce just for the sake of merchandising ought to cease on the Sabbath."

This is a representative view of Reformed teachers. The Sabbath is in place, ought to be observed by Christians, and falls on Sunday. Church attendance on Sunday is the moral fulfillment of the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy. Thus church attendance is more than just an opportunity to learn, serve, fellowship, etc. but is intrinsic to obedience to God beyond what is spiritually gained from the participation.

b. The Reformed view of the Sabbath as Sunday

Does the requirement to fulfill the Sabbath require one to worship on Saturday or Sunday? After all, the Hebrew calendar viewed the Sabbath as occurring from sunset on Friday evening until sunset on Saturday evening. Every occurrence in the Bible of the Sabbath when it is used in reference to a day means the seventh day of the week, which is Saturday. There are dozens of references to the Sabbath in the book of Acts, all referring to the seventh day of the week.

There is no evidence at all in the New Testament that the Sabbath became Sunday for the church. So how did the Reformed concept of the Sabbath occurring on Sunday for the church come about? The simple answer is from the history of the early church, particularly after the legalization of Christianity under Constantine in the early fourth century.

Reformed teachers have argued that the requirement of the Sabbath does not specify a particular day of the week but rather a seventh day rest. Jonathon Edwards wrote, “The fourth command does indeed suppose a particular day appointed; but it does not appoint any. It requires us to rest and keep holy a seventh day, one after every six of labor, which particular day God either had or would appoint.”

Thus the commandment is understood as unchanged but applied to Sunday in the way the Jews applied it to Saturday. James Dennison explains, “The change brought by the new covenant dispensation is not an alteration of the commandment; it is the alteration of ‘another law,’ which determined the beginning and ending of their working days. God’s example is not a moral institution of work Sunday through Friday with rest Saturday; rather it is a moral institution of six and one, i.e., six days labor and one day rest. Thus, the New Testament makes no change in the moral substance of the commandment.”

However, the Old Testament command is not to rest on one day out of every seven, but on “the seventh day, the Sabbath” (Exodus 16:26, 29). Sunday was understood as the first day of the week (Matthew 28:1). This is the understanding that was carried through the entire Bible. There is no warrant to view taking a day of rest other than Saturday as the fulfillment of the fourth commandment in Scripture.

Reformed teachers point to the “Lord’s Day” in the Scripture (Acts 20:7, Revelation 1:10), for which there is good reason to understand this to refer to Sunday, when Jesus rose from the dead (Mark 16:2; cf. 1 Corinthians 16:2). However, this is a leap to suggest that the Lord’s Day is a replacement for the Sabbath since that is not stated or even implied in the Scripture.

Just because the church met weekly does not mean they were obligated to do so under the fourth commandment. Like with infant baptism, Reformed theologians take a similarity and equate the two without warrant. As with Limited atonement, Reformed theologians hold to their reasoned conclusion in spite of direct verses that teach the opposite of that conclusion. Our weekly Sunday worship cannot be rightly called the Sabbath.

c. The Reformed application of the fourth commandment

Reformed theologians have differed over how Christians are to observe the Lord's Day. All agree that it should be a day of worship, rest, and doing mercy. Also, while everyone concurs that work that is required to maintain life is permitted (Matthew 12:9-14), there are disagreements regarding whether "worldly" recreation is permitted.

R. C. Sproul described this division, "Christians who believe the Sabbath should be observed actually splits into two groups. One holds what we call the Continental view: Recreation is permitted on the Sabbath. The other holds the Puritan view: Recreation is forbidden on the Sabbath. I take the position that recreation is a legitimate form of rest on the Sabbath."

First off, Sproul calls Sunday "the Sabbath" which indicates the view that Sunday has replaced Saturday as the application of the fourth commandment. But regarding the issue of recreation, the issue remains of those whose work is recreation. Should professional athletes refrain from participation in their sport? Should vendors at stadiums refrain from working? Should spectators choose other forms of recreation in order to avoid advancing the opportunity for these Christian workers to labor? Or should we refrain from any recreation that requires the work of others to produce?

The consistent application for those who hold to the fourth commandment has become very problematic in a society that is increasingly viewing Sunday as a weekend day just like Saturday. Hospitals are open on Sundays not only for life-saving measures but also for elective surgeries. Police do not only detain criminals on Sunday but also write parking tickets.

The practical application is to encourage people to find an occupation that allows them to keep the Sabbath holy but avoids becoming involved in the details of life. Upon any examination, we will find many inconsistencies existing among even those Reformed teachers themselves.

d. Why the Sabbath is not a moral mandate for believers under the New Covenant

There is no basis for understanding the seventh day to require one day of rest when the actual seventh day was the Sabbath that was result of the Mosaic Law. No Israelite would have considered resting on a Sunday instead of Saturday to be the fulfillment of the fourth commandment. No verse in the New Testament connects the Lord's day in any way to the fourth commandment. This is all conjecture. However, there is abundant evidence that the fourth commandment is not a directive for the Church:

1) It is as sign of God's covenant with Moses and given specifically to the nation of Israel. The reference to a perpetual covenant is specific to those who God addressed, "the sons of Israel." (Exodus 31:12-17). This is the old covenant that the church is not under (Romans 7:1-6). We are under the law of Christ and the sign of the New Covenant is the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:25).

2) Paul taught the Sabbath was a shadow in Colossians 2:16-17. Hebrews uses the same analogy of the shadow of the Law for sacrifices that are no longer applicable (Hebrews 10:1). Some suggest this is not the weekly Sabbath but including the phrase “a festival or a new moon” refers to those annual and monthly Jewish holy days (cf. 1 Chronicles 23:31; 2 Chronicles 2:4; 31:3; Ezekiel 45:17; Hosea 2:11) referring specifically to the weekly Sabbath.

3) Romans 14:5 not only explicitly forbids believers from judging those who do not hold to a special day but the context describes those who are able to exercise their freedom to treat each day the same as the stronger believer. Under the Reformed understanding of the fourth commandment, this is impossible to say. Under the Reformed view of the Sabbath, Christians are not free to hold each day alike and certainly are not the stronger one in faith.

4) Paul rebuked the Galatians for believing that God required them to observe special days or months or seasons or years, which includes the Sabbath (Galatians 4:10-11).

5) The Sabbath commands and the Sabbath practice is limited to Moses and the nation of Israel. Sabbath keeping did not exist prior to Moses and therefore the seventh day rest cannot be considered an eternal moral obligation.

Every day is a Sabbath rest for the believer since we have rested from our works to please God (Hebrews 4:9-11). We meet on Sundays to worship God, and we live each day to worship God. There is no New Testament command to obligate us to keep any single day special. There is only the general command to not forsake the gathering together with believers (Hebrews 10:24-25). There is freedom in the application of this command for the believer.

John MacArthur views the Sabbath as a ceremonial law, “We believe the Old Testament regulations governing Sabbath observances are ceremonial, not moral, aspects of the law. As such, they are no longer in force.” However, he is not representative of the complete form of Reformed theology, given his views on baptism, eschatology, etc. He has merely adopted the Reformed terminology to explain why certain Old Testament Laws are not applicable for today.

While MacArthur does not agree with Reformed theologians, he uses their terminology regarding the fourth commandment. He says, “I don’t call Sunday, Sunday. I call it the Lord’s Day....There’s a reason we don’t have a Saturday night service. Would it be wrong? No, not law, not necessarily wrong....But it just seems to me that God has placed His almighty hand on the first day of the week and said, “This is My Day. This is My day. And Sunday night services are disappearing all over the place, if they exist at all much anymore. You’d be hard pressed to find one. But as I said, it’s not the Lord’s morning. It’s the Lord’s Day and we want to make sure that we do not, according to Hebrews 10:25, “Forsake our assembling together, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day approaching.”

So is Sunday a special day to be held above other days? Calling Sunday by the term “the Lord’s Day” and questioning a person’s commitment to Hebrews 10:25 based upon their participation on Sunday is confusing if the answer is “no.”

We ought to teach the truth of the Scripture even if it leads people to make applications that we would not choose to make. There is not just the absence of the Sabbath obligation in the New Testament, but there are clear statements to not judge others who do not keep a holy day (Romans 14:5, Colossians 2:16). With this in mind, we cannot teach that Sunday holds a greater obligation. We can only encourage people to participate according to their opportunities and allow them the freedom to apply their choices in wisdom.

3. Conclusion

As with most churches, the function of Reformed churches center around the Sunday worship service. One reason for this is their view of the fourth commandment as obligating the participation of the church in the Sunday service. While this may bolster the attendance, it limits the freedom of the believer to make their choices regarding how they will live their lives for the Lord (Romans 14:5).

Furthermore, we ought to refrain from allowing anyone act as our judge regarding the Sabbath day (Colossians 2:16). Regardless of how ministerial they may appear or sound, there is no basis for the application of the Sabbath command for the New Testament believer. This is one of those things that were a shadow of what we now have in substance, Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:17). The Reformed understanding of the Sabbath leads to an obligation that was too burdensome even for the Israelites (cf. Acts 15:10).

Finally, the projection of religious authority in the liturgy and a “high view of God” in the church service is nothing more than a human undertaking that has proven to lead to a form of godliness without its power (cf. 2 Timothy 3:5). The early Presbyterians sought to free the church from such formalism they found in the Church of England but it inevitably creeps back in. Those who value liturgical worship will be hard pressed to outdo the Roman Catholic Church.

The Reformed view of the Old Testament affects other functions in the church. The obligations and responsibilities of believers are directly affected by the view of the Old Testament. This will be the subject of our next class when we look how Christians become sanctified unto holiness once they believe in Christ.