

Issues in Reformed Theology

Introduction

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Any class on Reformed theology could easily become voluminous. Since there are many aspects of theology, we will need to focus on the parts of Reformed theology that are the most problematic, thus the word “issues” in the title of this series. The vast majority of Reformed beliefs are in alignment with the Bible and though some of the areas of agreement may be referenced, the focus of this series will be the areas of concern.

1. Reformed theology defined

The word “Reformed” leads us to think of the Reformation, the Protestant movement to reestablish the Bible in the midst of Roman Catholic abuses and unbiblical teaching. However, “Reformed theology” has grown out of only part the Reformation.

Reformed theology particularly developed from the ministry of John Calvin and his followers unlike other significant movements coming out of the Protestant Reformation, such as Lutheranism, the Church of England and the Baptists. While there are countless Protestant denominations that derived from the reformers, by “Reformed theology” we only mean a subset of the beliefs whose roots are found in the teachings of John Calvin (1509-1564). Reformed denominations often will include the terms “Presbyterian” or “Reformed” in their title.

Calvin’s teachings are central to what became known as Calvinism. However, not all of what is considered Calvinism today was actually taught by Calvin himself. Furthermore, this class is called “Issues in Reformed Theology” rather than “Issues in Calvinism” because Calvinism is typically considered in modern times to center around the issue of predestination. Those who believe that God chooses those who will be saved from the foundation of the world are considered to be Calvinist. The issues that will be discussed in this series are beyond those surrounding the doctrine of predestination. Many people who are considered Calvinist would not agree with many of issues that we will discuss.

In the past, those who adopted the term “Reformed” were more homogeneous theologically. The rise of liberalism moved many Reformed churches away from the Bible. Now we find “Reformed Baptists” and even “Reformed Charismatics” as the title of “Reformed” is becoming more popular. Our attention will be directed more to those who are “Reformed” in the more traditional sense of Presbyterianism and other similar Reformed denominations. The reason is because the acceptance of the Reformed doctrine of election may lead to the acceptance of other Reformed doctrines that are more problematic and impact the faith and practice of those even outside the traditionally Reformed denominations.

2. Our predisposition to accept Reformed Theology

In many churches, all that is necessary for a positive opinion of someone is to hear that the person is “Reformed” in their theology. This typically means nothing more than the person believes in the doctrine of election. But there is far more to being “reformed” than a person’s view of the doctrines of grace.

The attraction to Reformed Theology results from it being on the side of biblical truth in some of the most significant doctrinal differences in history. From its beginning, people from a Reformed background have been not only correct but have been at the forefront of significant theological issues that have faced the church.

a. The Reformation and opposition to Roman Catholicism

Obviously the title of “Reformed theology” points back to its origin during the Protestant Reformation, which sought to reform Roman Catholicism from unbiblical teachings and practices. The most significant figure of the Reformation, along with Martin Luther, was John Calvin (1509-1564). His primary legacy resulted from his voluminous writings in opposition to many Catholic doctrines. Calvin became the namesake of a theological system that would later be referred to as Calvinism, initially by followers of Luther in opposition to certain doctrines. Calvin disliked this designation and wrote, “They could attach us no greater insult than this word, Calvinism. It is not hard to guess where such a deadly hatred comes from that they hold against me.” Many Calvinists preferred the “Reformed” to describe their theological beliefs and therefore this class will use that designation.

The historical roots of Reformed theology date back to John Calvin although his followers expanded some doctrines beyond what he taught. Those of the Reformed faith have faithfully served the continued struggle against Catholic theology and for this we share a fond affection.

b. Teaching the sovereignty of God (Calvinism)

Many of the central tenants of the theology of the followers of Calvin surrounded the doctrines of the sovereignty of God. This led to an opposing theological system within the Reformation, known as Arminianism. The primary doctrine of this opposing system was known as the Remonstrance, published in 1610. At the core of this debate was the question of God’s sovereignty in salvation.

The biblical teaching that the sinfulness of mankind results in death and that man has a total inability to respond in faith to God is fundamental to the role of God in salvation. God must unconditionally choose those who would believe since they have no power to seek God themselves (Romans 3:10-11). As salvation is from God, the security of salvation is as well and those who He calls to faith will persevere through His power. Because the followers of Calvin supported the biblical teaching of the doctrine of election, we find an affinity toward Reformed theology.

c. The modernist controversy

The 19th century brought attacks upon the integrity of the Bible including the denial of the infallibility and inerrancy of the Scripture. We find those of the Reformed perspective often at the forefront in defending the integrity of the Scripture.

The question of the authorship of the Bible began to ascend during the 19th century. Increasingly, theologians began to question the authorship of Bible books and how the biblical material came into being. Theories of dependence upon other sources outside of the divine inspiration of the Bible became popular. Reformed thinkers become involved on both sides of this issue of the integrity of the biblical accounts.

Princeton Seminary was founded 1812 by the general assembly of the Presbyterian and became the home for the most prominent theological men who defended the Bible against its critics. Charles Hodge (d. 1878), A.A. Hodge (d. 1886), and B.B. Warfield (d. 1921) and others served to contribute to the advancement of sound theology in the face of opposition. Charles Hodge published dozens of articles in the Princeton Review opposing Higher Criticism and Princeton's role as the home of conservative theology grew under B.B. Warfield in opposition to liberal theologians. This bold leadership by Reformed men is admirable in the early attacks on the integrity of the Bible.

The end of the 1800s saw the rise of theological liberalism among churches in Europe and the United States. People began to doubt long held beliefs involving the creation of the world, the biblical accounts of the flood and miraculous events, and even the doctrines of salvation in Christ. A variety of Christian Protestants argued in favor of the Bible and those from the Reformed faith were at the forefront.

Perhaps the most significant support for the Fundamentalist Movement came from Presbyterian businessmen Lyman and Milton Stewart who financed the publication and distribution of millions of copies of a twelve volume series called *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, published from 1910-1915. Reformed theologians were well represented among the 90 essays it contained. During this time, the Presbyterian Church of the United States was the first major denomination to endorse the "Five Fundamentals" of (1) the inerrancy of the original manuscripts of scripture, (2) Christ's virgin birth, (3) His vicarious atonement, (4) His bodily resurrection and (5) the reality of miracles as recorded in the Scripture.

Sadly, these Bible believing Presbyterians eventually lost the denomination to liberalism in the following years. As men who did not uphold the authority of the Bible overtook Princeton, theologically conservative men, led by J. Gresham Machen founded Westminster Seminary in 1929. This eventually led to the establishment of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1936 as an alternative to the Presbyterian Church of the United States. A second division over theological liberalism within the largest Presbyterian Church (USA) denomination occurred in 1973 with the founding of the Presbyterian Church of America. The PCA is now the main Presbyterian denomination espousing Reformed theology today and are very helpful in the defense of the Bible.

d. The Biblical Counseling Movement

Jay Adams is recognized as the founder of the Biblical Counseling Movement, which sought to affirm the Bible as God's uniquely sufficient means by which lives are conformed to Christ. In opposition to the inroads the field of psychology had made within the Christian Church, Adams authored *Competent to Counsel* in 1970, leading the establishment of the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors (NANC), which is now known as the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC). This assisted many theologically conservative churches in recognizing the need to follow biblical principles in their ministry and reject the inclusion of worldly methodologies.

Adams was of the Reformed faith and served on the faculty of Westminster Theological. Thus the Biblical Counseling Movement has spread disproportionately through Reformed Theologians and as such we find a great deal of like-mindedness due to their service in this critically practical area of Christian ministry.

3. Reasons why Reformed Theology has divergent theological conclusions

a. The role and value of theological statements from the past

Reformed theology places significant value on certain historic creedal statements. The most significant is the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646). Others include the Belgic Confession (1566), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and the Canons of Dort (1619) along with a number of other lesser statements.

To be sure, these are known as “subordinate standards,” that is subordinate to the Bible, which is the supreme standard. These statements are nevertheless considered to be reflective of the truth of the Bible and are often referred to as a basis for authoritative teaching.

For example, Reformed leader R. C. Sproul believed “*Without such confessions, theological anarchy reigns in the church and in the world.*”

Below are a couple of quotations from the Chancellor of Reformed Theological Seminary, Ligon Duncan:

“I think denominations, institutions, and churches that reject confessions are made vulnerable precisely in the two areas that creeds and confessions help us most. They’re vulnerable to failing to adhere to biblical doctrine and to teaching a clear system of biblical doctrine to their people.”

“I would say the first thing a pastor ought to do when entering a confessional church is discern whether the leaders know their confession’s teaching. Start training church leaders—both formal and informal—to ensure they are thoroughly acquainted with the church’s confession.”

In addition to these confessional statements, there is a dependence upon historical writings from significant figures in Reformed history. This extends far beyond John Calvin and it is not uncommon to find Reformed people quoting historical figures voluminously.

These statements build an adherence to them that is not easily reconsidered. If they are correct this is a blessing but even in the best case the view that these can prove helpful leads others to make declarations that prove to be less so.

In a real sense, the building of a theological system can lead significant doctrinal error as theological statements are built upon theological statements. A minor deviation can turn into a more faulty belief system when one poorly thought out statement is adopted as fact and forms the basis for additional theological development.

Better to teach the Bible alone as our source of authority and basis for faith and view the theological statements from history as useful but not inherently worthy of allegiance.

b. Doctrine that arises from a faulty approach to Bible interpretation

All biblical teaching comes from accurate Bible interpretation. Not all Bible passages are equally clear, as Peter noted when he referred to Paul's letters in writing "some things are hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). This is due to the nature of man seeking to understand the thoughts of God.

God intended mankind to understand the Bible and therefore the Bible is written in the normal human language of the readers. The Bible is understood in the same way that literature in general is understood and likewise we take the normal, ordinary, literal sense of the writings unless the immediate context and sensibility dictates otherwise.

The early reformers supported a literal approach to the Scripture in opposing Roman Catholicism but at times even they strayed, such as Luther viewing the story of Noah's Ark as an allegory for the church. In modern times, those of the Reformed faith will often view prophetic Scripture, such as Revelation, as allegorical and understand Israel in the New Testament as at times a reference to the church. These interpretative approaches result in divergent theology.

c. Doctrine that arises from deduction rather than direct biblical teaching

How we summarize the doctrine of the Bible arises from the synthesis of understanding various Bible passages that speak to such doctrine. Because the nature of Scripture is not delivered as a theological textbook but through a variety of literary types (narrative, prophetic, legal, poetic, epistolary, etc.) over many centuries, we must understand the full context to arrive at doctrinal conclusions. This examination of Scripture in order to build a system of theology is a necessary task in our study of our Lord as His disciple. Correct doctrine aligns with Scripture and without a direct Scriptural basis for our belief we are vulnerable to error.

These types of contextual doctrinal formulations can be categorized by how direct they come from the Bible text:

1) Simple statements of doctrinal truth directly from the Scripture

Most Bible doctrine can be understood directly from multiple straightforward declarations in the Bible. Examples include God is the Creator (Genesis 1:1); Man is sinful (Isaiah 53:6; Romans 3:10), Salvation is by God's grace (Ephesians 2:8-9), and Christ is the Head of the church (Ephesians 1:22; 4:15; Colossians 1:18).

2) A clear conclusion based upon the few direct statements from the Scripture

Some important Bible doctrine is not explicitly stated in one place in the Bible. This does not mean that we cannot be just as certain of the truthfulness of this conclusion. Nor does it mean that the doctrine is less significant. It only requires more than one Bible passage to understand the doctrinal truth.

The best example of this is the doctrine of the Trinity. There are direct Bible passages that teach that there is only one God (Deuteronomy 6:4), that God is the Father (1 Corinthians 8:6), that God is the Son (John 1:1), and that God is the Spirit (Acts 5:3). But there is no one single passage that teaches that the Three are One Person. To be sure, there are many verses that include the Three together, the most notable being Matthew 28:19-20 which groups the Three under one single name. But these Triadic formulations are short of a concise teaching of the doctrine, they simply support the doctrine.

If a Bible passage teaches a doctrine as true and another Bible passage teaches a related doctrine as true, it is valid to bring these two truths together into a broader understanding of true. Holding to two truth statements taught in different places in the Bible is an important means to understanding the truth of God's Word better and clearer.

3) A reasonable conclusion based upon a number of direct statements from the Scripture

Some doctrinal topics are derived from a larger number of Bible texts. When more Bible texts that are put together to comprehend a doctrine there is a greater possibility for misunderstanding. This then begins to impact the degree of certainty we have with our conclusion, as more biblical texts need to be fit together.

An example of this is with regard to end-times theology. There are direct texts that speak to a part of what will occur, such as the rapture of the church (1 Thessalonians 4:17), the bodily return of Christ to the earth (Acts 1:11), and the final judgment of the lost (Revelation 20:12). However, forming a sequence of these events that leads to a belief in the pre-tribulation rapture of the Church requires a synthesis of Bible texts.

This is not to say we are unable to make a determination regarding the teaching of the Bible regarding texts with clear truths that must be joined together to form a theological understanding. Yet the task becomes more difficult as the number of texts required for

the complete information increases. Still this is important for our understanding of God's Word to integrate truth statements together and we find Jesus doing this same thing at times. For example, Christ's teaching on future things in Matthew 24:29-31 incorporates truth statements from several Old Testament verses. These attempts are valid when they are consistent with the revelation of God.

4) An inference based upon a direct statement from Scripture

An inference is a conclusion that is arrived at by deducing what ought to follow in light of the truthfulness of the original statement.

While a study of logic is beyond the scope of this class, it is possible to understand that we can look at a conclusion and see if it necessarily follows from the premises or not. Some conclusions are legitimate. For example, if we know that Paul was an Apostle and that every Apostle was a man, we can conclude that Paul was a man.

However, many conclusions that people draw are only possible, but do not necessarily follow. For example, if we know that Paul was a man and that all Apostles were men, Paul might be an Apostle but that information alone does not allow us to declare that he was with confidence. These types of leaps are known as logical fallacies.

What makes conclusions even more difficult in the area of theology is that spiritual truth is spiritually discerned and the limits of the mind of man to understand God are significant. Man's attempt to reason through the Scripture is certainly challenged and requires the Spirit of God to illuminate our understanding. This is more than an academic exercise.

Once we allow our doctrine to be set upon inferences beyond the direct statements of Scripture we begin to incorporate those inferred conclusions into our theological framework. When these accepted conclusions are built upon with additional inferences, we end up with beliefs that are even further removed from the direct teaching of the Scripture. Inferences built upon inferences built upon inference can lead us astray.

It is problematic enough to base doctrine upon inferences rather than direct statements from Scripture but when our inferences are countered by other Scripture we are in doctrinal error. A simple example is to know that all men sin and that Jesus was a man and concluding that Jesus must have sinned. We have other Scripture that instructs us otherwise and when such is the case, we must defer to the Scripture rather than to our human reasoning.

In Reformed theology, there is quite a tendency to make inferences based upon statements from the Bible. We must be careful not to believe that the inferences are the same things as the Scriptural statement itself. There is much that we may think we can know but in reality may not be necessarily true. This has been true of God's people throughout time, including how we see the people of Israel function in the Old Testament and with the rejection of Christ.

4. The challenge with close association with Reformed theology

It is normal to expect those that we have greatly benefited from to be influential in our life and thinking. This is true not only of individuals but is also true of churches and even entire denominations. With this influence comes a need for critical examination based upon God's revelation in the Scripture.

In addition, personal networking of pastors along with broad marketing of the Christian publishing industry builds the visibility of Christian leaders, leading the unsuspecting to assume that a person's beliefs are reliably biblical. We may be tempted to only see the biggest difference between the teaching of various modern Calvinists as only a matter of style rather than substance.

Beliefs and doctrine affects our life. From our values and priorities, to our personal applications of God's Word, to our ministry philosophies and teaching, doctrine is the basis for so much of what we see in Christian ministry, good and bad. Some doctrine can be more readily observed, such as infant baptism, but at other times how it shapes what a person or a ministry does is imperceptive.

This series on Issues in Reformed Theology will help uncover these ways that aspects of Reformed Theology lead people into false conclusions about God and His will and into even wrong behavior and unrighteous judgment.

5. Class Schedule

Below is our plan for our series this summer:

June 3: Introduction
June 10: Covenant Theology
June 17: Determinism
June 24: Limited Atonement
July 1: The Lord's Supper
July 8: Infant Baptism
July 15: The Family
July 22: The Order of the Church
July 29: The Function of the Church
August 5: Sanctification
August 12: Postmillennialism
August 19: Politics and Government
August 26: Ecumenism

Each of these classes will investigate a different aspect of how Reformed doctrine distorts specific areas of true doctrine that often results in the way Christians live out their Christian lives and ministry.