

## What Does It Mean To Be Presbyterian?

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“What does it mean to be Presbyterian?” is a good question indeed, but depending on who you talk to depends on what answer you’ll receive because there are currently many different ways to be labeled a “Presbyterian.” Therefore in order to make this a more manageable task for you, the reader, I simply have one thing to say – a Presbyterian church is a reformed church. Of course this “one simple thing” needs to be explained because “reformed” has been tossed around even more than the word Presbyterian lately with the new resurgence in historical reformed theology today. So, by saying a Presbyterian church is reformed I mean it has five distinctive themes: Scripture, the covenant, the Church, divine sovereignty, and the kingdom of God.

Before I dive into what each of these five things mean, let me give a brief word of caution. I am very happy to call myself reformed, and though this is the case, I do not believe being reformed is a prerequisite for Presbyterian church membership, or even a prerequisite for being a Christian. I came to hold my reformed convictions through a great deal of personal struggle and angst with God’s Word. In no way do I want to make you, the reader, feel as if once one becomes reformed you have truly “arrived” at the higher echelon of Christian intellectual thought and practice. Though this is the case, I will try to persuade you all day long that “reformed theology” is just a synonym for “Biblical Christianity.” But if you study it and reject it, you are still my brother or sister in Christ. Now, let’s get onto our venture shall we?

### Scripture

If the reformed tradition did not begin with the Bible, God’s Word, we would be erroneous. Why? Because God is the Author of Scripture, not man. God is Definer, we are defined. The Bible has authority over all of life because it is inspired by God Himself. We must submit to it because when the Bible speaks, God speaks. We should not or cannot presume to set out for ourselves the principles to govern our lives. For God has done it already in giving us His Word which in its principles, touches on every area of our lives from worldview to how we ought to drink orange juice. A good summary of this mindset is: God has said it, I believe it, that settles it. Or as the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it in chapter 1.2, “...all the books of the Old and New Testaments...are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life.” The reformed tradition believes the Bible to be inspired, inerrant, and infallible (see 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:21). This means that the Holy Spirit inspired the Biblical authors to write down what they did, not in a robotic manner, but in such a way where the personalities of the authors were not destroyed but used in the process. Reformed churches believe that because God revealed Himself to us in a book, we ought to labor all our lives to know that book as well as we possibly can. The Bible should be not only known, but studied, dug into, examined, and treasured because in it we meet God face to face. The more we know God’s Word, the more we will know God.

Because the reformed tradition believes that the Bible ought to be studied vigorously, they have often found it good and necessary to state what they believe about God and His Word through creeds and confessions. Thus, you may hear any of the following creeds recited within a

reformed church: the Apostles Creed (325), the Nicene Creed (391), the Chalcedonian Creed (431), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Belgic Confession (1566), the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), and the London Baptist Confession (1689). Do you notice that most of the creeds and confessions either come from the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries or the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries? This was due to what is called the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation was led by people, such as Jon Hus, John Wycliffe, Martin Luther, and John Calvin (and many others), who desired not to start a new church but to reform the existing church of their day, the Roman Catholic Church. What was wrong with the Roman Catholic Church? From around the 4<sup>th</sup> century up into the 16<sup>th</sup> century the RCC (Roman Catholic Church) had set up a system of church government (with good intentions) to govern the Church. After a time, this system began to be abused and withhold many things from the common people. They believed the Bible was too advanced for the common man to understand. The RCC's power grew too great, and the abuses could no longer be tolerated. Enter the reformers as we mentioned above.

The reformers wanted to stop the abuses of the RCC and give the Bible into the hands of the common man. Many of them gave their lives for such a task. For example, John Wycliffe was persecuted and killed for translating the Bible into the common man's English in 1384. John Hus was killed in July of 1415 for translating the New Testament into the common man's Czech and teaching against the abuses of the RCC. Martin Luther, the Catholic priest turned reformer, stood against the abuses of the RCC and translated the Bible into German around 1520 so the German people could read the Bible for themselves. John Calvin, a Frenchman who lived in Geneva, Switzerland had a large influence on the Church through his life and theological writings. Calvin's influence proved to be so large that the word "reformed" is now synonymous with the word "Calvinism." Although these men did not want to start a new church, they were forced to leave the RCC and begin what came to be known as Protestantism. From the Protestant Reformation came a large amount of new denominations – Lutherans in Germany from Luther's influence, Presbyterians in Scotland and Ireland from the influence of John Calvin and John Knox, Puritans in England through the influence of John Owen, and eventually the some other groups (Baptist, Methodist, and Episcopal) came in also. The driving force behind the Reformation is best summarized by its five central pillars called the five solas: Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone), Soli Deo Gloria (for the glory of God alone), Solus Christo (by Christ's work alone are we saved), Sola Gratia (salvation by grace alone), and Sola Fide (justification by faith alone).

All of this history is great, and a study of the major figures of the Protestant Reformation would truly do one's soul good, but do not miss the point of the Reformation. I mention it within the section on Scripture because the main goal driving these men to do what they did was getting back to the Bible itself. This is just as relevant today as it was back then. With issues in the Church today such as relativism, re-defining sexuality, re-defining marriage, "green" environmentalism, gender neutralizing, emergent conversations, prosperity preaching, man-centeredness, humanism, naturalism, philosophies of all kinds, evolution, liberal theology, abortion, not to mention all the questions that rise out of the new inventions in the medical field and the moral ethics involved with them, economic pressures, etc. we must be grounded in the Word of God if we are going to make it through. If we leave our commitment to be a people centered on the Word of God, we will no doubt slowly slide into similar abuses as the RCC did. If we leave the firm foundation of God's Word we lose our ground to stand firm and without that, we will fall. This is why the first distinctive of the reformed tradition, and thus every reformed church, is the Scripture. All the distinctives below flow out of this one.

*For more on Scripture see:*

- a) [\*Thy Word is Truth\*](#) (E.J. Young)
- b) [\*The Doctrine of the Word of God\*](#) (John Frame)
- c) [\*The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority\*](#) (G.K. Beale)
- d) [\*The Institutes: Book 1, Chapters 6 and 7\*](#) (John Calvin)
- e) [\*Westminster Confession, Chapter 1\*](#)

## **Covenant**

Now we come to the second distinctive of reformed churches, the covenant, or as others would call it, covenant theology. Covenant theology means that God has always dealt with humanity in the same manner, through covenant. From Genesis to Revelation God says repeatedly, “I will be your God and you shall be My people.” This is not a request, as if God were asking people permission to do this. It is a declaration of what God will do because by His nature He is gracious and kind, wanting to draw men to Himself for His glory. This may seem simple enough, but there are massive implications to the central theme of covenant throughout the Bible. First, since covenant is God’s way of dealing with His people, covenant must be the lens through which we interpret all of Scripture. Thus, the Old and New Testaments are not to be looked upon as separate books, as if the Old were a Jewish Scripture and the New a Christian one. No, the reformed tradition has always been eager to see the Bible as a unified whole.

In Genesis we see what is called the covenant of works begin at creation between Adam and God (Genesis 1:28). Adam was commanded to not eat; he ate and failed to keep the covenant with His Creator. The same covenant moves forward with Noah, only to see his son commit evil and fail to keep the covenant as well (Genesis 9:1-2). Then we see something different when Abraham comes into play (Genesis 12-17). Beforehand with Adam and Noah, men received commands from God, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it.” But Abraham receives a promise, not a command. Why the change? This is what theologians call the move from the covenant of works (which men cannot keep) to the covenant of grace (which men do not have to keep). Although the covenant of grace began with Adam in Eden (see Hosea 6:7), it now appears crystal clear when Abraham comes onto the scene. Abraham is told that one of his descendants will bless the nations. We then see Abraham’s descendants (Israel) come into covenant with God on Mt. Sinai (Exodus). Though Israel has godly men (Moses, Samuel, David, etc.), women (Ruth, Rahab, Hannah, etc.), and prophets within it (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, etc.) they too prove unfaithful to the covenant with God (Judges – Esther). As you follow along throughout the Old Testament you find yourself yearning for someone to come and be faithful to God. That’s when Jesus comes on the scene. Jesus, unlike Adam and unlike Israel, is faithful to the covenant, and perfectly obeys every part of it. Jesus is the blessed One, the Descendant of Abraham through whom the world will be blessed. When God’s people were faithless, God was faithful to them through His Son Jesus.

This reveals to us that Jesus did not begin a new religion or start over from scratch when He came to earth. Jesus brought the Old Covenant to fulfillment in Himself (Matthew 5:17). Much more Jesus was the fulfillment of all that was previously established in the Old Covenant. Adam failed and tried to grasp equality with God by grasping for the fruit (Genesis 3), while Jesus obeyed and did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but willingly emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, to die on a cross (Phil. 2:6-11). Israel, God’s firstborn son

(Exodus 4:22) failed to be obedient to God, but Jesus, the true Israel (Son) of God was fully and perfectly obedient to God. Jesus Christ is announced in Hebrews as the mediator of the covenant relationship (Heb. 7:22, 8:6). The gospel offers Christ, and through being united to Christ by faith we enter into a covenant relationship with God. If you do not look at the Bible through the lens of covenant you lose the unity of the Scripture, and thus, redemptive history as a whole. Thus, the gospel cannot be rightly understood outside “covenant.”

This then makes the Church the covenant community. The preaching of the Word, the practice of shepherding and discipline, the participation in worship together, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are all signs, seals, expressions, and instruments of the covenant, through which the covenantal benefits and blessings of God pour out onto those who believe. The backbone of the Bible is the revelation in space and time of God's unchanging purpose of having a people on earth to whom He would relate to covenantally for His glory and for their joy – “I will be your God and you will be my people” implies all of this. John Wesley was often heard saying, “Everyone who belongs to Jesus belongs to everyone who belongs to Jesus.” We are part of a covenant people that is not isolated to our church, our denomination, our country, or even our time. By being bound to God in covenant we are bound to Christians forever in a mystical and beautiful way that we can never fully understand.

Because of the covenant, most reformed churches practice what is called Paedobaptism (Infant baptism). I say most reformed churches because not all do this. There are reformed Baptist churches who differ in view, and practice Credobaptism (believers baptism) instead. Infant baptism can only be understood through the lens of covenant. When Abraham entered into covenant with God in Genesis 17, God told him this in Genesis 17:8, “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you.” Notice how Abraham’s descendants were included in the covenant because Abraham believed? As a response to believing in God, Abraham is commanded to put the sign of the covenant, circumcision, onto his children. This would remain throughout the entire Old Testament. The ones (Israel) in covenant with the true God, would be known by circumcision. Reformed churches believe that God acts in the same manner, through families. In the New Testament, the sign of the covenant (circumcision) was fulfilled and replaced by baptism (Colossians 2:11-12). Just as one could visibly see who was an Israelite due to circumcision in the Old Testament, now in the New Testament, when one is baptized they are not saved, but they rather enter into the visible covenant community, the Church. Paul also comments on Abraham in Galatians 3:8 saying God preached the gospel to Abraham and he believed. If the gospel was preached to Abraham in Genesis 17, and he believed, and then put the sign of the covenant on his children as a response to believing in the promise/covenant himself, we should find examples of this in the New Testament if God still acts like this; and we do. In Acts 2:39 Peter preached to large Jewish audience who knew the Old Testament very well saying, “The promise (of salvation through Jesus) is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” Only through covenant can one understand Peter’s words. When one believes in Jesus, the promise is not only for them but for their children as well. Later in Acts and other places we have instances of household baptisms (10:2, 16:15, 16:31-34, 1 Corinthians 1:16), which again can only be understood if God still acts the same way He did in the Old Testament, through covenant.

The Lord’s Supper, as with baptism, has Old Testament roots also. In the Old Testament, Israel celebrated the Passover meal once a year, remembering how the angel of death passed over

them the night before the exodus because of the blood of a lamb (Exodus 12). When Jesus was approaching His death, He gathered His disciples at the time of Passover (not a coincidence) and had a similar meal together. As Old Testament Israel celebrated the Passover yearly, so too the Church now celebrates the Lord's Supper often. The bread reminds us of Jesus' body being broken for us, while the wine reminds us of the new covenant in His blood which was poured out in His death on the cross for us. Jesus is the Lamb which the Passover ultimately pointed to. Though we do celebrate the Lord's Supper to remember Jesus, we also do it to have a spiritual/mystical communion with Him too (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). We believe that God is present at the table in a mystical way, and therefore, gives grace to those who partake. Most reformed churches "fence" the table before offering it to their congregations. By "fencing" I mean just that, putting up a fence around the table to let certain people through, and to keep certain people out. This is done because 1 Corinthians 11:23-34 gives clear instructions about examining one's self before partaking of the table, lest you eat and drink judgment on yourself. This "fence" is intended to keep out those who don't know Jesus (non-Christians, and even young baptized infants who have not professed faith yet), and Christians who have sin that needs to be dealt with. Non-Christians should not partake of the Supper simply because they do not know Jesus. They neither love Him nor trust Him, so they should not partake. It would be wrong because coming to the table is an act of faith, and where faith is not present, the table shouldn't be also. The time when Christians are not to partake of the Supper is when they have sin that needs to be confessed or dealt with; until the sin is confessed to God (and possibly others), they should not come forward. All of this may sound strange, but the truth remains, the table of the Lord is not to be taken lightly. Some people in Corinth got sick and even died from partaking of the table in an unworthy manner (1 Corinthians 11:30). Remember God is present in the table, and anytime we approach God in a trivial manner, the consequences are not small. We must approach God in humility and honesty, about who we are and who He is. The Supper is the covenant meal of the Church. Taylor Rollo, a friend of mine, puts it like this, "The Lord's Supper is a covenant meal at the end of a covenant renewal ceremony (church service) where we are reminded of God's fidelity to us, we declare our fidelity to Him, and we declare our fidelity to one another. Just as God tells us "you will be my people" we look to the others who are taking the supper and say (proverbially) "these are my people because they are God's people".

*For more on Covenant see:*

- a) [\*The Covenant of Grace\* \(John Murray\)](#)
- b) [\*God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology\* \(Michael Horton\)](#)
- c) [\*Last Things First\* \(J.V. Fesko\)](#)
- d) [\*The Christ of the Covenants\* \(O. Palmer Robertson\)](#)
- e) [\*The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses\* \(Vern Poythress\)](#)
- f) [\*Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 3, Section – "The Covenant of Grace"\* \(Herman Bavinck\)](#)
- h) [\*Westminster Confession: Chapter 7, 26-29\*](#)

### **The Church**

The third distinctive of reformed churches is the doctrine of the Church. It is fitting to talk about the Church directly after a discussion of the covenant, because the Church is the covenant people of God. Because this is so, reformed churches have seen "the Church" in the Old Testament as well as in the New. This is why the New Testament says the Church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:19-22, 1 Peter 2:9-10). One way to

see the connection between the Old and New Testaments in regards to the Church, is how the people of God have been governed and led. In order to get there we must do some travelling first.

There are three models of Church government that have historically been used for reformed and non-reformed churches: Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational. The Episcopal model of church government is a hierarchal model, meaning it is a top down model. There are offices distinct from and superior to other offices. At the top there is the Archbishop, followed by Bishops, then the Rectors, with the individual congregations on the bottom. The Archbishop governs the whole thing, while the Bishops govern large areas of churches called diocese, by appointing rectors (or priests) in each congregation. The Roman Catholic Church is the most well known model of this with the Pope, his Cardinals, Bishops, Priests, and congregations. Other examples are the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Anglican Church, the Episcopalian Church, the United Methodist Church, and some Lutheran congregations as well.

You will be hard pressed to find anywhere in the Bible confirming or mandating this model of government, and they agree with that! Practitioners of the Episcopalian model believe no form of government is commanded in the Bible. They base the model off of the priesthood in Leviticus 8, and the appointment of the twelve apostles chosen to lead in the New Testament, along with the appointment of the 70 who were sent out in Luke 9-10. Their main argument is an argument from history because it is true that this model of government was in place and functioning as the sole method of government from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. They often ask, “Would God allow His church be led wrongly for such a long time?”

The Presbyterian model of Church government is not hierarchal, but representative. Presbyterian government has an Old Testament origin and New Testament continuity. Remember our talk on covenant? The whole Bible is a unified whole? This shows itself in Presbyterian government as well. Practitioners of this model believe you must look at the whole Bible, not just the New Testament to see what kind of government God mandates/commands. Numbers 11 is the origin of the Presbyterian model. God grants Moses help in leading the people by telling him to choose 70 men and call them elders. They bear the burden of the people along with Moses. After they were chosen the Spirit of God fell upon these men, equipping them to lead the people. Sound familiar? Numbers 11 is the Acts 2 “Pentecost” of the Old Testament.

Now, the word Presbyterian comes from the Greek word *presbuteros*, which means elder. Each local congregation is ruled by a plurality of elders who are chosen by the congregation. The group of elders from each congregation is called a session. These sessions are grouped together into geographical regions and called presbyteries. The presbytery oversees the work of each session in each congregation. Then, each presbytery is governed by what is called the General Assembly, which is made up of members from each session. In Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5, Paul calls for the appointment of elders in every city. In Paul’s mind, in order for the church to have its maturity, there needed to be a plurality of elders. In 1 Timothy 5:17 and following there seems to be evidence that there were two types of elders, those who taught and preached the Word and those who didn’t. 1 Timothy 5:17 says, “The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.” I think this shows that there is a distinction, preaching elders (who we call teaching elders – one of whom is the senior pastor), and shepherding elders (who we call ruling elders). The Presbyterian model also has the office of deacon. The origin of deacons comes from Acts 6 when the apostles chose men to take care of the physical needs of the people to free them to

labor in preaching and teaching. Deacons are not commanded from this chapter, they are deduced from this chapter. They could be seen as a fulfillment of the office of Almoners in historical Jewish synagogues. Those who use this form of government today are: all Presbyterian Churches, the Christian Reformed Church, and the Assemblies of God. Last note: It is interesting to note that after the reformation, every reformed church has been elder led.

The Congregational model of church government is perhaps the simplest to describe. This model is not hierarchal or representative, but independent. This means each local church is just that, a local church under the authority of Christ governed by itself alone. As you might expect because of the autonomy, or the independent nature of this model, there is a lot of variety from church to church in regard to its governance. The two most often seen models within the congregational system are single-elder congregationalism, and plural-elder congregationalism. In single-elder congregationalism the pastor is the elder who governs the whole church with the assistance of a group of deacons. In plural-elder congregationalism the pastor is one of many elders, who govern the congregation with the assistance of a group of deacons. But, unlike the Presbyterian model, these elders have no authority outside their own congregation, because each church is independently governed. Today congregationalism can be seen in: Southern Baptists, General Baptists, all other Baptists, Churches of Christ, Bible Churches, and all independent Churches.

It is necessary to note that there has been a resurgence of reformed Baptist churches in the past 20 years in the West. These churches are theologically almost identical to the reformed tradition (apart from Baptism), and are run by a plural-elder congregationalism. Notable examples of this in our day are John Piper at Bethlehem Baptist Church, Mark Dever at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Mark Driscoll at Mars Hill Church, and the popular theologian Wayne Grudem also puts forth this view.

Now before we move on, let me give say one last thing about these models of government. Each system's strength is also its weakness. For the Episcopalian model the strength is the speed at which things get done. For example, if a congregation has become a dead branch, needing to be lopped off, they will do it quickly and easily. The Archbishop gives the order and it is done. But you can see the weakness here as well. If the Archbishop is a corrupt and abusive man, the whole system is shot through with the same. Simply too much power is placed in one man's hands. The RCC of the Reformation time is a good example of this happening. For the Presbyterian model the strength is it built in accountability. Each elder only has one vote, even the teaching elder (senior pastor). This keeps all the power from sitting in one man's hands. Even if one man seems to gain an entire session behind him, anyone within the presbytery would be ready to sit and listen to one complaint about the man. Thus, because each individual session is governed by the presbytery and the General Assembly it is awfully hard to get away with anything wrong or unbiblical in this model. The weakness here is seen in that because there is so much built in accountability, things often take a long time to get done in a Presbyterian governed church. For the Congregational model the strength is its autonomous nature. Each congregation can do whatever it wants, when it wants, without having to go through the offices above them. This can also be its weakness, because an independent congregation can often exist without any accountability from other people, churches, or higher court. Also, whereas a dead branch congregation could be lopped off in the Episcopal model quickly and relatively fast in the Presbyterian model, this type of church would remain in existence for a long time in the Congregational model. As you can see, the strength of each is also its weakness.

For more on the Church see:

- a) [Who Runs the Church? 4 Views on Church Government](#) (Toon, Taylor, Patterson, Waldron)
- b) [What Is A Healthy Church?](#) (Mark Dever)
- c) [What Is A Healthy Church Member?](#) (Thabiti Anyabwile)
- d) [Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organized Religion](#) (Deyoung & Kluck)
- e) [Westminster Confession: Chapter 25](#)

### **Divine Sovereignty**

The fourth distinctive theme in a reformed church is divine sovereignty. What does this mean? In its simplest form, divine sovereignty means just that. God is sovereign (1 Timothy 6:15-16), nothing can stay His hand (Job 42:2), He is completely supreme in and over all things (Colossians 1:15-20), He does whatever He pleases (Psalm 115:3), and governs all things according to the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11b). God is sovereign in His creation, for He created all things and all things are sustained in Him (Genesis 1, Colossians 1:17). After reading the creation account in Genesis 1 most people liken God to an artist who creates majestic works of wonder. This is true but not far enough. In order for an artist to make something they need materials to begin with: paint, charcoal, canvas, brushes, tools, drop cloths, lighting, instruments, pen, paper, steel, computers, etc. the list could go on forever couldn't it? This is not so with God, for He created everything (visible and invisible) "*ex nihilo*" or out of nothing. God is the true artist, whose voice is so powerful and sovereign, when He speaks, creation appears! One application of this is that because God is creative in His works, we too can be creative in our artistic expression.

God is sovereign in His providence, for He not only created all things from nothing, but continues to rule over all things now. The story of Joseph clearly portrays this (Genesis 37-50). In Genesis 50:19-20 Joseph said to his brothers, who faked his death and sold him into slavery, "Don't be afraid, for I am in God's place. As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good. To bring it about this present result, to preserve many people alive." What? God was behind ("meant") Joseph's bad circumstances in his life? Yes. It may be mysterious, but the Bible is clear that God is the One behind the scenes of history, driving, allowing, ordaining, and bringing about all events everywhere for His own purposes. History is "His story" indeed, because if "all things work according to the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11b), then nothing works according to the counsel of our will.

Before moving on further into God's sovereignty I have to pause to make sure you know something about the responsibility of man. It may be very easy to talk of God's sovereignty in a manner that obliterates man's responsibility, but the Bible does no such thing. In the Bible, God is sovereign and man is responsible, at the same time. The Bible does not lean toward one side more than the other, by saying that "God is sovereign therefore man is not responsible.", or "Man is responsible therefore God is not sovereign." The Bible simply holds them both up, at the same time, and says "Yes." One example of this is Acts 2:23, which says, "This Jesus, delivered up according to the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of lawless men." Notice that Peter, in this sermon, ascribes the death of Jesus to God's predetermined plan while calling out the men who killed Him, clearly holding them responsible! This is what I mean when I say the Bible holds both God's sovereignty and man's responsibility up in agreement. The reformed tradition has always been quick to let the Bible

hold these two up at the same time, without giving much explanation as to how they fit together. (For other places that show this see: Philippians 2:12-13, Psalm 2, Isaiah 10:5-19, Acts 4:27-28)

God is not only sovereign in creation and in providence, He is sovereign in salvation as well. I should warn you, this is the theology within the reformed tradition that brings forth the most debate, conversation, and controversy. So before I begin to tell you about this rich part of the reformed tradition I want to tell you something. Anytime you read the Bible you make conclusions about God and man, how you make those conclusions determines everything. I want you to come to conclusions about everything based on what the Bible says, not based on what you may think is true, and not based on what you want to be true, no matter what the cost to you. Now we can begin this section.

Jonah said it best. Inside the belly of the fish Jonah cried, "Salvation belongs to the LORD." (Jonah 2:9) One of the key marks of reformed churches is that they believe in a system of doctrine in which salvation begins and ends with God alone. This system (which is usually called "The Five Points of Calvinism") is described with the acronym T.U.L.I.P., which stands for: Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints. Now, these may be called the Five Points of Calvinism but you should know that John Calvin did not author them himself. Why are they named after him? Let me explain.

In 1610, one year after the death of Jacob Arminius (a Dutch seminary professor) five articles of faith based on his teachings were drawn up by his followers. The Arminians, as his followers came to be called, presented these five doctrines to the State of Holland in the form of a "Remonstrance" (a protest). The Arminian party insisted that the Belgic Confession of Faith and the Heidelberg Catechism (the official expression of the doctrinal position of the Churches of Holland) be changed to conform to the doctrinal views contained in the Remonstrance. The Arminians objected to those doctrines upheld in both the Catechism and the Confession relating to divine sovereignty, human inability, unconditional election or predestination, particular redemption, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints. It was in connection with these matters that they wanted the official standards of the Church of Holland revised. In 1618 a national Synod was called to meet in Dort for the purpose of examining the views of the Arminians in the light of Scripture. The Synod was convened by the States-General of Holland on November 13, 1618. There were 84 members and 18 secular commissioners. There were 154 sessions held during the seven months the Synod met to consider these matters, the last of which was on May 9, 1619. During these sessions the Synod deliberated and examined the five points given by the Remonstrance. After comparing them with the testimony of Scripture, they failed to reconcile the Arminians teaching with the Word of God. Thus, the doctrines of the Remonstrance were rejected unanimously. But, the Synod felt that a simple rejection was not enough. They concluded that they ought to set forth five points of their own regarding the teachings that were previously called into question. This they did, and the five points they crafted became what we now call "the five points of Calvinism." The name Calvinism was derived from the French reformer, John Calvin (1509-1564), who had taught and defended these views. It may seem strange to many in our day that the Synod of Dort rejected as heretical the five doctrines advanced by the Arminians, because these doctrines have gained wide acceptance in the modern Church. In fact, they are rarely questioned in our day while the vast majority of Protestant theologians of that day took a much different view of these matters. They maintained that the Bible set forth a system of doctrine quite different from that advocated by the Arminian

party. Salvation was viewed by the members of the Synod as a work of grace from beginning to end.

By total depravity they meant (and reformed churches mean today) that the sinner is neither willing nor able to repent and believe in Christ on his own initiative. Man is not as bad as he could be but sinful to the core in all his parts, hints the “total”. So much so that he cannot and will not turn from sin to choose Christ apart from God changing his heart first. Most people have a very bleak view of this doctrine, but total depravity is not just badness, total depravity is deadness to joy and blindness to beauty. Rather than having the oasis that will satisfy us, namely God, we eat mouthfuls of sand thinking they satisfy. A friend of mine once explained it to me like this. “If a lion is in a cage, and you put before him a bowl of meat, and a bowl of wheat, which one will the lion choose to eat?” I replied, “The lion will always choose the meat.” My friend then asked, “Why?” “Because,” I said, “he would never choose the wheat, because lion’s don’t eat wheat because of who they are by nature.” He replied, “Exactly, the lion will always eat the meat because of who he is. You see total depravity is like this. Our nature, using its freedom of choice, will only choose sin! Why? That is who we are! It must take an act outside of ourselves to change what is going on inside of ourselves.” I’ve never heard it put better than that since (See: Psalm 51:5, Psalm 143:2, Jeremiah 13:23, 17:9, John 6:44, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Romans 14:23, Romans 3:10-18, Isaiah 64:6, and Ephesians 2:1-3).

By unconditional election the members of the Synod meant that God chooses us for salvation based on His choice alone, not on the basis of our foreseen faith. This is why it is unconditional, because there are no conditions in God’s choice of us. He chooses, not us. You may reply, “I thought I did make a choice to follow Jesus though, didn’t I?” Yes, you did. But why did you make that choice? It is not because you conjured up enough moral rectitude to do so, it is because God chose you first and because He chose you, you were able to choose Him. You would not have wanted to turn from sin and turn toward Jesus if God had not overcome your sinfulness and given you a new heart first. Election teaches us how we came to be as we are now, as Christians (See: Matthew 11:27, John 5:21, 2 Thessalonians 2:13, Deuteronomy 10:14-15, Psalm 65:4, John 1:12-13, John 6:37, 44, 65, Philippians 2:12-13, Romans 8-11, Deuteronomy 7:7-8, 1 Thessalonians 5:9, Romans 9:10-23, Revelation 13:8, 2 Timothy 1:8-9, John 8:47, 10:25-36, Ephesians 1:4-14, Acts 13:48, Deuteronomy 10:14-15, and Romans 8:29-30).

Now some of you may be asking a hard question. If God chose who would be saved, does that mean God chooses those who will not be saved? The answer from the Bible is yes. Before I explain this I want to remind you to make conclusions about God and man, based on what the Bible says, rather than what you want to be true or would like to be true. Reprobation has historically been the doctrine that has addressed this issue. Reprobation is God’s sovereign decision to pass over some persons, in sorrow deciding to not save them, punishing them for their sins, to glorify His justice and wrath. This is by far the hardest and most difficult doctrine to accept, because it seems so harsh to people who’ve been made in the image of God. John Calvin even said “The decree is dreadful indeed.” Where do I get this from in the Bible? First of all, as we have said, God acts the same in the Old Testament and the New Testament. In the Old Testament it is clear that God had a chosen people (which rejected all others). It is not different in the New Testament, God also has a chosen people now, although immensely larger. It is massively important to point out three things. First, there is a difference between how the Bible speaks about election and reprobation. Election is spoken of as a cause for rejoicing, while reprobation is spoken of as something that brings God sorrow (Ezekiel 33:11, Romans 9:1-4).

Second, it is important to remember that those who are reprobate are still guilty of not repenting and believing the gospel, and that this is the cause of their damnation. Every person in hell will be there because of their sins and their refusal to follow Jesus. Lastly, we need to trust that God does not save certain people because by passing over them, He gains greater glory. God can ordain something that causes Him sorrow, while being pleased about the glory He gains from it (See: Jude 4, 13, 1 Peter 2:8, 2 Peter 2:17, Romans 9:17-22, Romans 11:7, Matthew 11:25-26, Proverbs 16:4, and Psalm 76:10).

By limited atonement the Synod meant that Jesus did not die and shed His blood for every man, but for the elect only. This does not mean the cross is limited in how many people could be saved, but in how many people are actually saved. Fast forward to the New Heavens and the New Earth, all those people that you see around you, the people from every tribe, language, tongue, and nation; they are the elect, the only ones for whom Jesus died. This also is powerfully clear from a covenant view point (whole Bible as a unified whole). If the sacrifices in the Old Testament were only for the sins of the people of God (Israel), why would the New Testament sacrifice, Jesus on the cross, be any different? Indeed it is not. This provides assurance that Jesus' work on the cross secured joy and pleasures forevermore for us in Jesus forever (See: Matthew 1:21, 20:28, 26:28, Isaiah 53:11, John 10:11-16, 17:9, 20, Acts 18:9-10, Ephesians 5:25-27, Titus 2:14, Hebrews 9:28, and Revelation 5:9-10, 13:8).

By irresistible grace the members of the Synod did not mean that God can never be resisted, He can and is. Rather, they meant that God allows His grace to be resisted until He chooses to overcome our resistance, give us a new heart, triumph over our sin, and make us His own. This is what takes place directly before someone chooses to believe and prays to receive Christ, because again, how could one choose Christ if their hearts don't want Him? This grace is described in Ezekiel 36:23-37, and 1 Corinthians 1:23-24. This shows God's commitment, power, and love toward us so that we will be let freed from the bondage of sin, and freed to make much of Himself, by enjoying Him forever. This is love defined. Don't lose me here. All whom God calls and predestines *will* come because they cannot resist His grace once He replaces their heart of stone with one of flesh. Why would they? Before we have a heart of stone we cannot delight in anything but sin, but when we get a heart of flesh we can finally see the beauty of Jesus and cannot resist! It is not so much that we cannot refuse, but that we will not refuse. (See: 2 Corinthians 4:4-6, John 6:44, Ezekiel 11:19, Galatians 1:15 w/ Jeremiah 1:5, and 2 Timothy 2:25-26).

By perseverance of the saints they meant two things. First, that Christians need to persevere to the end to be saved (Matthew 24:13), and second, all true Christians will persevere by God's enablement. This is not the same as "Once Saved Always Saved." The mindset of "Once Saved Always Saved" produces a sinful passivity dishonoring to God. What do I mean? I mean that in this mindset you could live like the devil and still say, "I'm saved, I'm going to heaven because I got my ticket already." Do you see how passive that is? In perseverance of the saints there is an active obedience that you must have. We must work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12), and we must endure to the end in order to be saved (Matthew 24:13). But in this active obedience we must trust that God is the One causing His own elect to persevere in faith and holy living as He is working in and through us what is pleasing in His sight (Philippians 2:13). This is the gracious "keeping" work of God, through all the affliction and suffering of the life, so that we will not be lost in the end. Praise God that Christ has a firmer grip on you than you will ever have on Him (See: John 10:28-29, Romans 8:29-30, Philippians 1:6, 2 Peter 1:3, Jude 24, 1 John 2:19, and Isaiah 14:24).

You can see why this part of the reformed tradition causes so much stir can't you? I do think this is Biblical Christianity, and would encourage you to embrace these doctrines alongside me. But let me say it again. In no way do I want to make you feel as if once you believe in these five points you have "arrived" at the higher echelon of Christian intellectual thought and practice and that all those who have not embraced these five points have malfunctioning intellectual equipment. Every man made theological system has errors in it. As I said when I began I am very happy to call myself reformed, but I did not come to agreement with these five points slowly or easily, it took time. Rarely does it happen quickly. God patiently led me through it, and though it was hard to give up such notions as "self determination", I wouldn't have it any other way. God gets the glory, I get the joy. Amen!

The reformed tradition is often opposed for being too severe in their doctrines of God's sovereignty in the world, especially in the area of salvation. One of the critiques is that these doctrines do not lead anyone to any kind of evangelistic zeal, or burden to see men come to Christ. This is far from the truth. In fact, I believe one cannot have any hope in sharing the gospel with any person, if they reject the doctrines described above. Here is why.

In Acts chapter 18, Paul is discouraged in Corinth because a group of Jews did not believe his preaching that Jesus was the Messiah sent to save them. Paul says in Acts 18:6, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." Afterwards Paul went to Titius Justus' house and then to Crispus's house, preaching the same Christ, and was amazed that all the households believed; along with many other Corinthians. Paul seemed to still be discouraged though, as if the smell of what had happened earlier with the Jews was still heavy on him. God encourages Paul in 18:9-10, "And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, 'Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.'" It seems like a usual encouragement from the Lord here. He makes sure to tell Paul that He is with him always and even promises safety, which Paul did not often have.

But what makes this encouragement so astounding is what God ends with, "...for I have many people in this city." What does that mean? Not very many people in Corinth had come to faith in Christ yet. So how could God say that He had many people in this city? This phrase only makes sense when seen in the context of God's electing purposes in the world. It is because there are elect people within the Corinth that God has chosen for salvation from before the world began, who have not heard the gospel yet. God encourages Paul to keep on preaching, because of those people. This is simply the outworking of Romans 10:14-17 in which it is clearly said that no one comes to faith apart from hearing the gospel. God was encouraging Paul to be the vessel of salvation for these people that God had chosen from before the foundation of the world, that are now residing in Corinth. Paul was obviously so strengthened by this word from God that he later encourages Timothy in the same manner, telling him to labor and "endure all things for the sake of the elect, so that they may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory." (2 Tim. 2:10) Paul labored and endured all things for the sake of the elect in Corinth. Why? Because the sovereignty of God in choosing people gave Paul hope that God's Word, the gospel, would never return void, but always accomplish the purpose for which it is sent. (Isaiah 55:10-11)

What does this have to do with evangelism? How does the sovereignty of God empower, enable, and equip us to bring the gospel to the people we live among? Because we to, along with Paul, have this same encouragement from God. No matter where we live, we can truthfully cling to the fact that God has chosen people long ago in our towns, cities, states, and nations, and has

ordained that the gospel be preached to them so they can believe. We are invited to be the means that God uses to carry out His eternal purposes! If I did not believe in God's sovereignty in salvation, I would be so utterly discouraged every time I shared the gospel, because if they do not believe it is my fault! I did not make it clear enough, or try as hard as I should have! But knowing that God has chosen people that will come to faith upon hearing the gospel gives me hope in sharing my faith! It is as if God were taking us fishing and promising a huge catch! It is important to note that because we do not know who these elect ones are that God has chosen within our cities, we share with everyone. When people come to faith, we can know for sure, that it is because they have been chosen from long ago. I know of no doctrine that leads to a greater evangelistic zeal than a promise of a great catch from a sovereign God! History reveals this as well. When William Carey (the father of modern missions) left and went abroad to share the gospel, he went because the sovereign election of God gave him hope to do so. After Carey a wave of reformed men and women left to do the same! Take heart, and be encouraged to share the gospel with all people, for God has many people in your city, and upon hearing the gospel, they will come to faith!

As I said before, these doctrines are the most controversial part of reformed theology, but can see how vital they are for a sound Biblical mindset and worldview? If these are absent man quickly replaces himself as the center rather than God. This is clearly seen in how people define the love of God. What is love? What does it mean to say that God is love, or that God loves us? I think there are two options, one bad and dishonoring to God, and one good which honors God very much.

First, if you remove the above doctrines from you theology and hold to something closer to the beliefs of the Remonstrance above, God's love quickly becomes man-centered. In this way God's love is defined as follows: God loves us and makes much of us through the cross, and in response to this, God seems lovely to us. We are the center of His affections and the sole reason He came to earth. Someone once told me that I could see how much God loved me by seeing how passionately He pursues to have me. I disagree and think that God pursues me, not because He loves me, but because He loves His glory. This man-centered definition of love is hurtful to God and to man because it gives all the glory (the making much of) to man, not God. God is not honored in this love. Second, if you believe in the above doctrines you will have a much more God-centered love, defined as follows: God shows His love toward us by entering into time and space, dying for us, so that we could be freed from sin, and freed to make much of God by enjoying Him forever. This definition is lovely to God and to man, because it gives all the glory (making much of) to God and not to man. He freed us from what was hurtful to us, sin, and freed us further by giving us what we needed most, Himself! God is honored in this definition. God is love because He relentlessly pursues the praises of His own name in us! By God pursuing Himself in us, we are satisfied because God is the only one who can satisfy, and by God doing this He is glorified! If we say we are God-centered and think man is at the center of God's affections, we are man-centered. "God-centered" is believing that God is uppermost in the affections of God, and that God loves His glory more than He loves us! To be God-centered is to love that God is the most God-centered person in existence. Psalm 106:6, 8 shows why we were saved. It says, "Both we and our fathers have sinned... Yet he saved them for his name's sake, that he might make known his mighty power."

These past couple of pages on the reformed tradition's love for the doctrine of divine sovereignty may have brought up more questions than answers for you. If it has, great! Talk to your pastor, or read some (or all!) of the volumes and volumes that have been written on this

topic throughout Church history. Most of all, I want you to go to the source, the Word of God, praying that God would open your soul to His majestic story of glory that you now find yourself submerged in.

*For more on Divine Sovereignty see:*

- a) [\*What Is Reformed Theology?\* \(R.C. Sproul\)](#)
- b) [\*TULIP: The Pursuit of God's Glory in Salvation\* \(John Piper\)](#)
- c) [\*The Bondage of the Will\* \(Martin Luther\)](#)
- d) [\*Foundations of Grace: A Long Line of Godly Men\* \(Steven J. Lawson\)](#)
- e) [\*Chosen By God\* \(R.C. Sproul\)](#)
- f) [\*The Doctrines of Grace: Rediscovering the Evangelical Gospel\* \(Boice & Ryken\)](#)
- g) [\*Westminster Confession: Chapter 3, 5, 9-18\*](#)

### **The Kingdom of God**

The fifth and last distinctive of the reformed tradition is the kingdom of God. As we get closer to the New Testament, we see a rising anticipation and yearning for the King to come and bring His kingdom with Him into this world (Isaiah 9:1-7, 11:1-9). This yearning arises out of the despair, suffering, pain, and poverty seen in the world. When Jesus came, He came as this King, bringing and establishing His kingdom (Luke 2:10-14, 4:14-21). But, we still see so much despair, suffering, pain, and poverty in the world don't we? Why is this so? Because although the kingdom of Christ has come already, it has not come in full. The Church is now waiting for Jesus to come back a second time to usher in His rule in full forever. Because of this truth, the reformed tradition has historically spoken of the time we currently live in as, "the already and not yet." Jesus has come already, but has not come in full, yet. He has partly brought His kingdom of grace and rule into the world through His bride, the Church (which shows us that the evangelism, church planting, missions, helping the needy, etc. is kingdom work). But He has not brought the full power and authority of His kingdom into this world yet. The Bible speaks of it like this. We were saved when we placed our faith in Him (Romans 10:9), but we will be finally saved at the day of His appearing (2 Corinthians 6:2, Romans 8:18-25). We were sanctified the moment we believed in Jesus (Hebrews 2:11), but not yet because we are being sanctified still today (John 15:1-4). We were glorified the moment we believed in Jesus (Romans 8:30), but not yet because we await the day of His coming when He will usher His glorious kingdom into the world in full (2 Thessalonians 1:10).

This "already but not yet" idea helps us remember there is something bigger going on in the world and that the kingdom of God is more than our own personal stories. Each Christian's story of gracious redemption is stunning, but it's not the whole thing. Jesus is up to something in this world, which is why the Church has long prayed, "Your kingdom come, You will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:10) Christians therefore rightly desire that suffering of every kind be ended and alleviated. Pain in this world has already been eased in part, because the kingdom is now extending into the world through the message of the gospel. But one day, when Jesus comes back to take His Bride for Himself, all suffering will be erased in full and what has already been established will be nothing comparison when the "not yet" is here.

*For more on the Kingdom of God see:*

- a) [\*The Kingdom of God\* \(Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones\)](#)
- b) [\*Living In God's Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture\* \(VanDrunen\)](#)

c) [City of God](#) (Augustine)

d) [Romans 13: Life in Two Kingdoms](#) (Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones)

### **An Ending Note – Semper Reformanda**

After much of the reformation was over, the reformers taught what is known as “semper reformanda” which means “always reforming.” By this they meant that the Church must stand for the Truth of the gospel in each new age in history, but they also meant that how the Church does this will change with each new generation. Why? Because as the world changes, the Church must adapt and be willing to share these same glorious Truths in new ways. As I’ve said many times, this is a summary at best. I hope this has given you a desire to study and look into these things further. If you so desire, I’ve given you links to books and the specific chapters in the Westminster Confession to direct your study deeper. I do pray that this has been a fruitful experience for you, and that you now know what the reformed tradition is, what it stands for, and who it loves above all – Jesus.

*(Certain parts of this essay are my summary of “What is a Reformed Church?” by Stephen Smallman. I have added a few additions of my own in all of the sections. Special thanks to Chris Robins and Taylor Rollo. Their additions, and editing eyes have been a massive blessing to me, and I hope to you as well.)*