



What is Reformed?

Reformed Christians are a small part of a much larger body of believers who love and serve Jesus Christ. We're part of a family that includes Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Evangelical, and a host of other churches that confess and practice the Christian faith.

Reformed teachings are shared by denominations other than the Christian Reformed Church. What's different is the emphasis that we might place on them. Cornelius Plantinga writes:

“Our accents lie more on the sovereignty of God, on the authority of Scripture, on the need for disciplined holiness in personal Christian life, and finally, on Christianity as a religion of the Kingdom.”

—*A Sure Thing: What We Believe and Why*
(Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 2001), p. 281

For example, the Reformed faith teaches the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all creation. We can't imagine a Christian church that doesn't hold to that teaching. But Reformed believers place a lot more emphasis on this teaching than many other Christians do. As a result, Reformed believers have invested a lot of their energy and resources in Christian education (Christian day schools, colleges, and seminaries), Christ-centered political/social action, and parachurch ministries to those in need.

While all Bible-believing Christians share one single language of faith, as Plantinga points out, we all speak it with our own accent. Be proud of your accent. Thank God for it. Add yours to the rich diversity of tongues that speak of the great things God has done.

Why the Church Needed Reforming

Two thousand years ago, on Pentecost, God poured out the Holy Spirit. By the power of the Spirit, Jesus' followers began to spread the good news about him worldwide. Where their preaching was heard, churches sprang up. These churches lived the gospel and, in turn, spread it to others as well. As these churches matured, they joined together into an organizational structure that helped them support each other, held them accountable, and kept them on the right track in their teaching. For a thousand years churches were more or less organized under one overarching structure.

During that time the organizational structure of the church hardened and its leaders became corrupt. By the dawn of the second millennium power struggles and doctrinal differences between church leaders split the church into two parts: the Eastern Orthodox Church, headed by the patriarch of the Church of Constantinople, and the Latin Western Church, led by the pope, the bishop of Rome. This church came to be known as the Roman Catholic Church.

By the time the sixteenth century rolled around, many Reformers had tried to correct the teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, calling it back to obedience to God's Word. But the powerful church leadership had managed to suppress these attempts, often by torturing and killing the Reformers.

So what needed reforming? Here's just a partial list:

- Corruption was widespread among the clergy, especially at the top.
- The church tortured people suspected of holding non-orthodox beliefs until they confessed or died.
- The church encouraged believers to pray to Mary and the saints.
- Salesmen for the church went around selling “indulgences”—letters written by the pope supposedly forgiving people their sins. One of these, Tetzl, was heard to proclaim loudly, “The minute your money drops in the box, the soul of your relative jumps out of purgatory into heaven.”

During the sixteenth century, though, reform could no longer be stemmed. Many people began to follow and support the Reformers. The Roman Catholic Church could no longer silence or turf out these “Protestants.” A number of events came together to place the Bible into the hands of the people in the pew. By having personal access to the Bible, they were able to judge for themselves whether what the church leaders were teaching them was actually true. As a result, many believers followed the Reformers out of the Roman Catholic Church in order to return to the teachings of Scripture.

A number of strands of Protestant churches began as a result of the Reformation: Lutheran and Anabaptist churches in Germany, Anglican (Episcopalian) churches in England, Reformed churches in Switzerland and France, and Presbyterian churches in Scotland—among others.

The good thing about all these churches springing up is that they could all re-form themselves into fellowships that could live out their beliefs free from the oppression and coercion of the Church of Rome. In fact, that was also good for the Roman Church, because in response to the Reformation it did a great deal to clean up its own act.

What’s sad, though, is the way in which this fragmentation—necessary as it may have been at the time—split up the visible body of Christ on earth. All these churches have continued to divide again and again, often over fairly minor differences. This has resulted in a vast array of churches, making well-meaning seekers and new Christians scratch their heads in bewilderment. Which is the real church? Which one should I join? Which one really teaches and lives what the Bible says? In fact, most of them do. But each church brings its own unique emphasis.

The Birth of the Reformed Churches

The Reformed Churches formed one branch of the Protestant churches that broke from the Roman Catholic Church of that day. They began in the sixteenth century in Switzerland under the leadership of Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin. Calvin’s teachings became the dominant and leading force in these churches as they spread across Europe, particularly to France, the Netherlands, Scotland, and, by the eighteenth century, to North America, Africa, Hungary, Indonesia, and many other parts of the globe.

John Calvin was born in Noyon, France, in 1509. Educated in the humanities, he earned his academic stripes summa cum laude at age 24. Inspired by the teachings of reformers like Martin Luther, Calvin took up serious study of the Bible. His education and his knowledge of Greek and Hebrew gave him access to what for most people remained a hidden book. His study of the Bible prompted him to write commentaries on almost every book of Scripture. He never did tackle the book of Revelation, which may have been wise on his part, given the endless variety of interpretations that generate so much more heat than light today. He also wrote a fabulous summary of biblical teaching entitled *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin’s works still serve as excellent resources for studying God’s Word. In fact, the *Institutes* have just been translated and published in Russian and are enjoying an enthusiastic response.

Because he was persecuted by the Roman Church, Calvin had to flee France. He was drafted by another Reformer, Guillaume Farel, to support the Protestant cause in Geneva, Switzerland. There Calvin became an active preacher, teacher, leader, and proponent of Reformation teachings. While in many ways a child of his age, Calvin made a tremendous contribution to helping us understand the Bible and the faith to which it calls us.

Reformed teaching was introduced to Scotland by John Knox, who was initially influenced by the Lutheran stream of the Reformation. His teacher, Patrick Hamilton, was burned to death for his faith, and Knox himself was captured by the French and forced into hard labor as a galley slave. Once freed, he studied with Calvin in Geneva, returning to Scotland in 1559. In spite of stiff opposition from both church and state, Knox succeeded in establishing what came to be known as the Presbyterian Church.

So What's the Difference?

How did Calvin get along with other church leaders of his day? Opposing Roman Catholic teachings of the time, he agreed with the other Reformers that

- Salvation is by grace alone through faith, and not by our own good works.
- The Bible alone is the authoritative Word of God for our lives—not church tradition or what church leaders say.
- All believers are priests of God, anointed in Christ to serve him always, everywhere, in all they do.
- God gave us two sacraments, baptism and communion, which are signs and seals of God's promises.
- A clergy's blessing of the communion bread and wine do not really turn them into the actual body and blood of Christ.
- The original sinful condition in which we are born as well as our actual sins are all fully washed away by Christ's one sacrifice on the cross.
- Prayer should be directed to God alone, not to saints or to Mary. In fact, all believers are both sinners needing God's constant forgiveness and saints whom the Holy Spirit is already remaking to be like Jesus.

So what were some of the differences that have kept the followers of these Reformers in separate denominations ever since? Here are a few:

- Calvin differed with Luther on how Christ is present in the Lord's Supper. Calvin taught that Jesus was not physically present but was spiritually present through the work of the Holy Spirit in believers' hearts. Luther taught that Christ was in some sense still physically present in the bread and wine. Calvin also had a different view of how the kingdom of God actually operates in this present world. And Calvin placed more emphasis on how we should live as a result of God's grace while Luther placed more emphasis on continually experiencing that grace itself.
- Calvin differed with Zwingli on the Lord's Supper. Calvin taught that in communion Jesus actively participates. Jesus is our host who actually gives us his grace through the operation of the Holy Spirit. Zwingli taught that communion was our own doing—our remembering what Jesus did for us on the cross.
- Calvin differed with the Anabaptists on the role of civil government. Calvin saw government as a necessary agent of God to which Christians had to submit and which they had to actively support. The Anabaptists taught that civil government was only for non-Christians and that those within the kingdom of God had to separate themselves from civil society. Calvin also maintained the tradition of infant baptism, a practice rejected by the Anabaptists in favor of believer's baptism.
- Calvin differed with the Anglicans/Episcopalians on many of the same points as he did with the Church of Rome. Anglicanism broke with the corrupt leadership of the Roman Church but retained many of its teachings.

Pros and Cons

Before he went to the cross to earn our salvation, Jesus prayed to his Father:

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

—John 17:20-21

Clearly Jesus wanted the church to be one unified fellowship around the whole world. But through these two millennia the church has been fractured into different groups—groups that often tear each other apart over

relatively unimportant things. There's no denying that the Reformation contributed to this fragmentation. So was it good or was it bad that it happened?

Thoughtful Reformed Christians would probably answer that question by saying it was both. It was bad that the Reformation had to break up the visible unity of the church. But it was good that it did so because the church in those days had gone so far astray. Luther, Calvin, Knox, and Zwingli never wanted to break up the body of Christ. That's why we call them "Reformers." They wanted to stay in the church. They urgently tried to get the Church of Rome to re-form, to become obedient again to the Word of God. That was their aim—not to establish their own brand of Christianity. But they ran out of choices when the church leaders of their day stubbornly refused to budge and persecuted them ruthlessly. The Reformers had to break from the existing church. Notice in the verse above how Jesus prays not only for unity but also asks that believers will remain in God. When the church drifted away from God, the Reformers saw no option but to return to the straight and narrow as commanded by Scripture, even when it meant breaking ranks with the Roman Catholic Church.

Where does that leave us? We need to stay true to the teaching of Scripture. That's the only way we can stay in Christ. However, we should always, always be looking for opportunities to join with other Christians. We should work with them even if our differences will not allow us, yet, to routinely worship with them. We need to keep reaching out to each other as we continue to reach for our Bibles. We may not always agree on doctrine or on how to worship. But there's plenty we can agree on that God wants us to do in this impoverished, sin-racked world. So let's join efforts and do what needs doing together. Let's make our own unique contribution to God's mission, using the particular gifts God's Spirit has given us. That way we may be the hands and feet and voice of our Savior for those who need to share in his goodness. Then we'll still be functioning as Christ's body. And the world will experience God's reconciling love.

As Reformed Christians we want to keep praying both of these: "Lord, keep us obediently in you" and "Lord, make us one." And to the best of our ability we'll need to work at both, right along with our Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, and Baptist sisters and brothers.

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