

What Does a Reformed Church Look Like?

What kind of church is the Reformed Presbyterian Church? We hope that this brief explanation will help answer your question.

A Personal Introduction to the Reformed Presbyterian Church

I (Rich Ganz) had been a believer in Jesus for less than one year, when I was introduced to the Reformed Presbyterian Church, and the pastor, Pastor Ed Robson, invited me to study with him. Everything I learned at that time was thrilling as well as challenging. Coming from a Jewish background, there was one thing about the Reformed Presbyterian Church that troubled me. It was the name of the church: Reformed. In Judaism, the term “Reformed” signifies the most liberal and unacceptable branch of Judaism for anyone who is interested in biblical orthodoxy. I began to fear that the name of this denomination signified a radical departure from biblical doctrine and orthodoxy. I mentioned this to Pastor Robson. I suggested that he might consider changing the name from the “Reformed Presbyterian Church” (RPC) to the “Orthodox Presbyterian Church” (OPC)! At that time, I did not realize just how ecclesiastically untenable my suggestion was. It was at that point that Pastor Robson began my instruction in Reformed theology. It was not long before I saw the incredible historic and theological significance behind the name “Reformed Presbyterian”. One thing I learned at the very outset of my studies was that Reformed theology is as far removed from liberalism as one can get, but is also as close to pristine biblical orthodoxy as has ever been seen. It is my hope that you will see this as well, as you read this and consider joining with us in the Reformed Presbyterian Church in our vision to see the Kingdom of God advanced on earth.

Who are We?

Reformed Christianity, and thus the Reformed Presbyterian Church, has its root in the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, which was led by men such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Knox. Reformed Christianity is evangelical Christianity. The early teachers of the Protestant Reformation were evangelical. They taught the biblical truth that we are saved from death and given the gift of eternal life, only through faith in the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf; that is, only through faith in His life, death, and resurrection, as it is stated in the Bible. Nothing other than repentance of our sins and faith in Jesus is necessary for salvation. Indeed, salvation from sin, judgment, and death cannot be received in any other way. It is all through Jesus Christ alone. There is nothing we can do to earn, prompt, or pay for the free gift of salvation. This teaching was in opposition to the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church (the only church at that time), and was the leading doctrine of the Protestant, or Reformed, churches.

The Reformed Presbyterian Church continues to believe and teach the historic, biblical, evangelical way of salvation which the Protestant Reformers left as their legacy for Christ's church. While once all Protestant churches were generally known as "Reformed", today the term is usually applied only to those churches which have followed the Calvinistic branch of the Protestant Reformation. Reformed churches are Calvinistic in doctrine, and place a biblical emphasis on the majesty and sovereignty of God.

Our belief in a thoroughly sovereign God does not mean that we lack zeal for the preaching of the gospel and the conversion of the lost to Christ. Any Christian who has come to understand God's central place in redemption should abound both in zeal for the salvation of the lost and in passion for Christ. If you look at the men who followed the Calvinistic doctrine in the past, you will see that this is so. For example, John Calvin, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, and J. Gresham Machen all burned for the salvation of the lost. More recently, men such as Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Francis Schaeffer, D. James Kennedy, R.C. Sproul, J.I Packer, John Piper, and John MacArthur have continued the passionate historic preaching and fervent missionary tradition of the Reformed church.

If nothing else is understood, it is important to understand that the Reformed Presbyterian Church has no affiliation whatsoever with any liberal church, even if it is Presbyterian, or even if it is still called “Reformed”. Liberal denominations have departed from the evangelical faith of the Reformation, and should not be calling themselves "Reformed". Even our common Presbyterianism cannot bridge the gap which opened when liberal churches departed from the authority of the Bible and the biblical doctrines of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformed Presbyterian Church is "Reformed" not just in name but in fact.

The Reformed church is not insipid liberalism, nor is it dead orthodoxy. It is alive and well, flourishing and living for Christ the King. It is only when the doctrine and life of the true, historic Reformed church is lost that such churches as these become deformed and spiritually dead. When the Holy Spirit once again revives Christ's church, then the biblical faith of the Reformed church is bound to be rediscovered and applied.

Another core belief which is characteristic of a biblically based church of the Reformation is that the Bible is true. In fact, the Bible is the Truth, and it is the only authority and rule for faith and life. Today, liberal churches no longer accept the infallibility and absolute authority of the Bible. For example, Time Magazine ran a story concerning a candidate for the ministry in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. This church is still sometimes called a Reformed church. The candidate denied the virgin birth of Christ, His substitutionary atonement, and His resurrection. Yet this candidate was accepted into the ministry. This is not a unique exception. Today, in many liberal churches which once accepted the authority of Scripture, we find practicing homosexuals and lesbians in leading ministry positions. None of the great Reformed leaders would have tolerated this, or would have even believed that such a thing were possible in a church of Jesus Christ.

Another aspect of the Reformed faith is that the majority of Reformed churches are Presbyterian. The term "Presbyterian" refers to how the church is governed. Each congregation is under the leadership, care, and oversight of *presbyters*, that is, elders that teach and rule. These elders are elected, and also form part of the higher courts known as Presbytery and Synod.

Reformed/Evangelical Areas of Agreement

Before further specifying the main teachings of the Reformed faith (and also of the Reformed Presbyterian Church), we should mention the areas of agreement that we have with all evangelical churches that have continued to follow the Bible, but that do not believe that the Bible teaches Calvinism:

We all wholeheartedly accept the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, as the infallible Word of God (Psalm 119:160, 2 Timothy 3:16-17). This includes six day creation and the fall of mankind into sin and rebellion against God (Genesis 1-3).

We all preach the necessity of regeneration, or the new birth, for every person in order for them to be justified before God (John 3:3,7).

We all agree and proclaim that Jesus is the only Savior (Acts 4:12). He is fully God and fully man. He was punished for us so that our sins might be forgiven and His righteousness accounted to us (2 Corinthians 5:21). Due to such a two-pronged salvation we have in Him, believers possess eternal life.

We all agree on the virgin birth, the incarnation, and believe in both the natural and the supernatural intervention of God into history in miracles, healings, etc. (Luke 1:34-35, John 1:14).

We all believe that Jesus Christ lived a sinless and righteous life, was crucified on the cross, rose bodily from the dead on the third day, has ascended to heaven and is now seated in rule at the right hand of the Father, and that, in due time, all of His disciples (that is, everyone who believes in Him) will be raised from physical death to everlasting life and glory evermore (Luke 24:1-8, 50-51; John 26:64; John 3:16).

We all believe in the visible return of Jesus at the end of the age to this earth for final judgment (Acts 17:31, Matthew 28:20).

Reformed/Evangelical Areas of Distinction

The above areas of agreement are shared by both Reformed and Evangelical Christians. At the same time, there are several substantial differences that distinguish us. The most important of these differences is in regard to the biblical doctrine of salvation. In the Reformed faith, we believe that God is both the author and perfecter of our salvation (Philippians 1:6). Salvation does not depend on our "decision". Salvation in Jesus Christ is the work of Christ alone from beginning to end. We believe that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. This separates us from much of modern Arminian Evangelical Christianity, which sees salvation as a cooperative endeavor between God and man, in which salvation ultimately depends upon man's *decision* for Christ. We adamantly repudiate this view of salvation. We believe that we are justified by faith alone in Christ (Romans 5:1). We testify that even our faith is "God's gift, not of ourselves lest we would boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The Reformed faith developed a simple five point acronym, called T.U.L.I.P. This acronym delineates how we see the glorious, majestic, and sovereign work of God in salvation. These five points, known as the *five points of Calvinism*, summarize the distinctive beliefs of the Reformed faith in regards to the doctrine of salvation.

Total Depravity – Every part of man has been polluted by sin, and therefore does not function as it should to lead men to God. Man, in his entirety, is under the curse for sin. This does not mean that everyone is actually as wicked as they might be, but that no one can please God by his own efforts (Jeremiah 17:9-10, Romans 3:10-18). We must be born again by the Spirit of God.

Unconditional Election – God has selected those who are to be saved through His eternal decree which He instituted before the world was made. Salvation is from God, and it is from all eternity (Ephesians 1:4-6).

Limited Atonement – Jesus Christ did not die indiscriminately for all mankind, but only for His people who are known to God savingly from eternity according to His decree. Jesus' death was sufficient for all mankind, but efficient only for His people, and provides a real and complete redemption for them from all sin (Matthew 1:21; Matthew 20:28; John 10:15,26; John 17:9).

Irresistible Grace – All whom God has included in His decree of salvation, whom God has given to Christ as His people, and for whom Christ died, will be saved through faith, because God will perfectly and infallibly accomplish that salvation (John 6:37,44).

Perseverance of the Saints – All for whom Christ died, and who have irresistibly been called to saving faith in Jesus Christ, cannot be lost again. Those who truly accept God's salvation in Jesus Christ are preserved in faith and will persevere to the end (John 10:27-29; Hebrews 10:35-39).

The above five points form the basis of the Reformed, or Calvinistic, doctrine of salvation. Reformed beliefs about God direct all of our thinking and all of our living. God is sovereign in all things. We, and the world, are His creation. In the Reformed faith, we rejoice in a God who is wholly and absolutely sovereign. Even the grace of God is a sovereign grace. As the Bible says, "He bestows mercy on whom He bestows mercy, and withholds it from those whom He will withhold it" (Romans 9:18). As Jesus said, "You did not choose me. I chose you" (John 15:16). Sadly, this teaching of the predestinating work of God, of God's sovereign grace and power in salvation, is rejected by many believers. Such a response is disturbing, because this teaching is a huge comfort, encouragement, and source of strength to believers in Christ. It teaches us that our hope is in the Lord, and not in ourselves. Our hope is in His saving mercy, not in our "decision" to choose Christ. Salvation begins and ends at the throne of grace, not at the throne of man. The sovereign power of God in salvation is meant to be a point of comfort and hope, not controversy or humanistic derision. We are all fickle people, and should praise God that His salvation withstands our fickle vicissitudes. We rejoice that "He who began this great work in us will perfect it till the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). The Reformed Christian does not believe that the intention of God can fail. God always succeeds in saving those whom He has purposed to save.

The God-centeredness of the Reformed faith extends to all areas of life, including our corporate worship. Reformed believers hold to what is called the *Regulative Principle of Worship*. This principle states that whatever is not specifically commanded by God for corporate worship is forbidden (Deuteronomy 12:32; 1 Corinthians 14:26,40; Hebrews 9:1). When you visit us, you will see several exciting biblical applications of the Regulative Principle at work in our worship service. All that we do in life and in worship is designed to be in obedience to God's Word, and *always* for His glory.

Creeds and Confessions

The Reformed Presbyterian Church, unlike many evangelical churches today, believes in the legitimacy and usefulness of creeds. We are a creedal church. We have a published confession of faith. Our creedal position, found in the Westminster Standards, is subordinate to the Bible, and we pray that we will not confess anything which is not taught in the Bible. In the Reformed Presbyterian Church, we never place our creeds and confessions above the Bible. We recognize that creeds are man-produced documents which need to be changed when it is shown that the Bible teaches otherwise. Nevertheless, every Christian believes and lives according to some understanding of the teaching of Scripture. We believe that it is imperative for us to openly and clearly state all that we believe God's Word teaches, rather than retreat into an ambiguous, pious-sounding statement such as, "We have no creed but Christ."

Reformed believers hold that the Holy Spirit has led and enlightened the church throughout the centuries as it has studied and reflected upon God's Word and upon how that Word applies to all of our beliefs and duties as redeemed people of Christ. In our understanding of the Bible, we are standing on the shoulders of the brave and earnest godly men and women

who have preceded us. Their studies of the Bible, and their conclusions from such study, are included in the great historic confessions which we gratefully use to help us on the path of a deepened commitment in faith and life to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Out of the doctrinal and creedal struggles of the past, we have received a carefully compiled system of doctrine, belief, and Christian ethics. We are the beneficiaries of a deep, mature, biblical, and historic faith.

Our Life

The Reformed faith produced a well understood doctrine of the Christian life. This doctrinal clarity strikes the balance between false mysticism, pietism, and asceticism on the one side, and bankrupt worldliness on the other. This world and life view engages the totality of who we are as believers. It engages our heart, soul, mind, and strength. This position takes seriously God's command to "love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength" (Mark 12:30). This world and life view encompasses all of God's creation and the totality of man as being engaged in a grand endeavor to live for the glory of God in every possible way.

All of mankind, all of life, all of creation groans to be free (Romans 8:19-23). While we believe that bringing the lost to Christ is our priority, we also believe that God continues to command us to subdue this world to and for Him. For example, there are no "holy orders" in Reformed churches. In our view, all believers are called to full-time Christian service in their respective vocations. The Reformed believer exerts an influence in arts, in politics, in business, in medicine, in education, in science; in essence, in every honest work found in the world.

We do not agree with the popular sermon illustration which says that Christians should not be polishing brass on a sinking ship. We are engaged in the building of culture out of our faith. Since it is, in fact, impossible not to be engaged with the world while we are in the world, we believe that our calling is to be engaged with the world while living as believers in Jesus Christ.

When God's people of the Old Testament were sent into Babylonian exile, they were told to seek the welfare of the city where God had sent them, and to pray to God on its behalf. God joined the welfare of His people to the welfare of the ungodly city in an explicit way (Jeremiah 29:7). We are in the world, but not of the world (John 17:14-16). By being engaged with the world, we are not merely polishing brass on a sinking ship. We are following God's command to exercise dominion over the creation even though the creation is not forever.

Conclusion

Our motto is: *"Reformed according to God's Word and ever reforming."* This side of glory, we can never be satisfied with the status quo for ourselves, for our church, or for our society. We expect struggle. We expect conflict, both in the pursuit of the goals God has given us, and as we live the life to which God has called us (John 7:7, John 16:33, 2 Timothy 3:12, 1 Peter 1:6-7). At the same time, we know that "tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Romans 5:3-5). As we follow God's plan for our life, we walk in His path of obedience, abiding in God's love, living for God's glory, and becoming more and more like Christ.

Much has been covered, but not every point has been made, in this brief explanation of what a Reformed church is today. Let this be a starting point for further dialogue. We cordially invite you to worship and fellowship with us in the Reformed Presbyterian Church. Come with your questions and thoughts, as we study, learn, and grow together.

Let me summarize the Reformed faith with two sentences made famous by the Apostle Paul when he spoke of Jesus Christ: *"For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him alone belongs the glory forever and ever. Amen"* (Romans 11:36). This church unashamedly and unswervingly seeks to be Christ-centered in all things, faithful to His Word, and giving Him the glory.