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LESSON 4: TRACING THE MEANING OF *REFORMED*

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*Introductory Overview*

As a final lesson providing historical & theological background for Reformed Theology, we will consider the historical and modern use of the term *Reformed*. Its meaning has not been fixed in stone, & in recent decades especially, it has often been used in ways that create theological confusion. We will examine its use during the Reformation, as well as how various Protestant & evangelical traditions understand the term today. Our goal is to use the term with clarity and sincerity, understanding both in mind & heart what we mean when we say *Reformed*.

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## I. Historical Origins & Usage

### A. The Catholic Faith

There were many Protestant traditions that emerged out of the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s; Lutheranism, Presbyterianism, Dutch Reformed, Anglicanism, Baptists, etc. However, what they all broadly shared was a conviction of justification by faith apart from works (*Sola Fide*), grounded in Scripture. They had a shared catholic faith, rooted in the Gospel.

### B. Lutheran & Reformed Lines Drawn

During the Reformation, Martin Luther & the Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli had an irreconcilable split regarding the Lord's Table. During the Marburg Colloquy in 1529 (a debate attempting to reconcile their views), Luther, being very zealous for the pure teaching of the Word, stood in fierce opposition to Zwingli about Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, and could not come to a unity on the matter. This contributed to further divisions within reformation churches. Zwingli's understanding of the Lord's Supper (which was later refined by Calvin and became characteristic of the broader Reformed tradition), was strongly opposed by Luther & his followers. So, those who were not Lutheran were associated with the *Reformed* tradition, especially as the reformation developed in Switzerland, in contrast to *Lutheran* churches. This does not mean that Luther & his followers were not reformers or were not key in the reformation of the Church; these terms just seemed to come about naturally over this issue of the Lord's Table. Further, it should be noted that, although *Reformed* was primarily used to distinguish these churches from the Lutheran churches, it was not originally the name of a single denomination, but a broad theological and ecclesiastical designation for churches shaped by the Swiss Reformation.

### C. Simply Reformed?

Since then, the term *Reformed* has been used in various ways. As we have already noted in our lessons, it has a spiritual use, referring to the continual heart reformation of the true Christian. While *Reformed* was not a particularly common self-designation among many of the English Puritans, they frequently emphasized the continual reformation of the Church and the Christian according to the Word of God. It has an institutional use within denominational titles: **Reformed Church in America** (RCA), **Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America** (RPCNA), **North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council** (NAPARC), to name a few. And of course there is its theological use; that is, how it is used to denote a systematic framework of theological beliefs. This last one is the focus of our Reformed Foundations class. As stated in the introduction, the term *Reformed* is used in a variety of ways, making it important that we understand these different uses so that we can speak carefully and understand others accurately. More importantly, we want *Christ Alone Church* to have a well-rounded understanding of the Reformed faith and what we mean when we say we are a *Reformed* Church. Therefore, for the remainder of this lesson, we will begin with the broadest uses of the term and gradually narrow our focus to its more exclusive theological definitions.

## II. Modern Usage: Orthodox Protestantism

There are some (albeit, not many) who would identify **Reformed** as simply being in line with the general orthodox teachings of the protestant reformation that mostly all protestants would hold to. For example, Mike Winger, a former Calvary Chapel pastor & now founder of BibleThinker.org ministries, says he is Reformed. ***I did say this a long time ago that I that I consider myself Reformed. And I think that what I mean by that is that I'm in the same tradition as the reformation, though I am not a Calvinist.*** He goes on to explain that he is not Catholic, & he affirms the 5 Solas, so in that way he is Reformed. He thinks others who use the term Reformed in a more exclusive way seem to equate it with Calvinism.

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## III. Modern Usage: Calvinism

As we touched on in our first introductory class, the Doctrines of Grace, or Calvinism, are a core component of Reformed Theology. Championed by men such as Augustine, Luther, & Calvin, the Doctrines of Grace were quite the norm among the Reformers & Puritans. In our times, there are some who view Calvinism as not simply part of Reformed Theology, but the sum total of it.

John MacArthur, now gone to be with the Lord this year, was a spiritual giant in the Church. He was able to capture the minds of many with his clear exposition & articulation of the Scriptures. While a **leaky** Dispensationalist, MacArthur was a Calvinist, & held a close-knit friendship with R.C. Sproul, Ligonier Ministries as a whole, & many other well-known Reformed pastors & preachers. These circles helped MacArthur reach many young Reformed-minded men & women in the Church. While MacArthur would not style himself as **Reformed**, many would, & do, most likely due to his associations & his unwavering devotion to God's sovereignty. Similarly, John Piper recently wrote an article titled ***The Beauty of Reformed Theology***. The very first sentence captures this view. ***I love Reformed theology (the doctrines of grace, the five points of Calvinism) the way I love a cherished picture of my wife.***

There are also some opponents of Calvinism who assume it represents all of Reformed Theology. In a YouTube video titled, ***The Absurdity of Reformed Theology***, the argument is an attempted refutation of only Calvinism.

We must be aware that sometimes, when people mention Reformed Theology, whether for good or for ill, there is the possibility they are simply referring to the Doctrines of Grace.

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## IV. Modern Usage: The 3 C's

We now arrive at what Christ Alone Church means when we refer to ourselves as being a **Reformed Church**, & what we mean when we say that we hold to & teach Reformed Theology.

Broadly speaking, many Presbyterian, Continental (e.g. Dutch) Reformed, and Reformed Baptist churches have understood Reformed Theology to encompass far more than Calvinism alone. Broadly speaking, it includes what we will call the **Three C's: Calvinism, Covenant Theology, and Confessionalism**. Of course, there are other doctrinal scopes (such as ecclesiology, the ordinances, corporate worship, etc.) that flow from the Reformed faith, but these Three C's are the larger, more commonly held doctrines & practices of many Reformed Christians & churches. In this way, we are not reducing Reformed Theology to the belief of God's sovereignty in salvation. This is a very important belief & hope that we cling to, but we also mean more than that; we want to affirm the robust, historic faith of the Church that speaks to every area of life.

The Creeds, Confessions, & Catechisms of the historic Church help us to more narrowly learn, affirm, & practice various biblical truths the Church has held. Of course, there is room for disagreements on

various doctrinal matters, so churches that define Reformed Theology in this way have differing views on things like Baptism, church government & hierarchy, political theology, Covenant Theology, etc. These churches will subscribe to confessions that mirror their convictions, or they will at least take exceptions in certain confessions on areas of disagreement. For example, we have been learning & affirming the Heidelberg Catechism during our Lord's Day worship. When we get to the part concerning baptism, many of us (not all) will disagree with (or *take exception to*) Question & Answer #74 on infant baptism. But generally, we can say that the Heidelberg reflects & summarizes our beliefs.

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## V. Modern Usage: Continental or Truly Reformed (T.R.)

Lastly, there are those on the spectrum who will argue that someone is not Truly Reformed, or **T.R.**, unless they either hold to the **Three Forms of Unity** (generally represented by Continental Reformed churches) or the **Westminster Standards** (generally represented by Presbyterian churches). While this is a semi-serious argument, with the whole T.R. label meant to be a joke about denominational pride, there are those who would still say that the most faithful Reformed tradition flows first from the sets of confessions just listed above.

The Three Forms of Unity are the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), & the Canons of Dort (1618-1619); the Westminster Standards are made up of the Westminster Confession (1646), and the Westminster Larger & Shorter Catechisms (1647). Baptists do not affirm some of the stances found in these documents, such as infant baptism or articulations of Covenant Theology that mirror infant baptism, so they would not generally subscribe or hold to these documents. This is not to say that they cannot read & learn from or agree with them to an extent, but they would not submit themselves to these documents without taking a variety of exceptions. It is easier for the sake of clarity & conscience to subscribe to confessions closer to their tradition. Because of this, some would say Baptists are not really Reformed. While this is not the view of all who hold these confessional packages, it is important for us to know that some have this perspective of what it means to be Reformed.

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## VI. Does It Matter?

### A. Gracious Agreement

We have seen that the term **Reformed** has historically been used in a variety of ways, especially when discussing its theology. Are all Protestants Reformed, or does the term require Calvinism? And beyond that, must one also hold to Covenant Theology and confessionalism? Or is adherence to particular historic confessions essential?

It is fair to say there is no single, universally agreed-upon definition of what it means to be Reformed. In a broad sense, all orthodox Protestants stand in continuity with the theology recovered during the Protestant Reformation of the 1500's, even if they differ significantly in doctrine and practice. In a narrower sense, however, the term is often used to describe those who hold to Calvinistic soteriology.

Moving further, especially in contrast to more modern developments such as American Dispensationalism and highly individualistic approaches to worship and Church life, many have used the **Three C's** framework to describe Reformed Theology. This provides a more comprehensive description of the Reformed tradition than Calvinism alone, as it includes both a doctrine of salvation and a broader theological framework.

Finally, some view that the most concrete and enduring expression of the Reformed tradition is found in the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Standards. These documents not only articulate Calvinistic soteriology, but also preserve a general consistency of the theology of the magisterial reformers.

## B. Gracious Disagreement

All that to say, there are reasonable arguments within all of these views, & there is not a raging war against heresy in where these views of Reformed Theology disagree. Yet we must be careful that we do not allow factious mindsets to prevail when we have these discussions. We must truthfully state our stances with firm convictions without breaking the bonds of fellowship over non-heretical differences. Kevin DeYoung wrote a short article addressing a pondering question in the conservative Evangelical world, *Is John Piper Really Reformed?* He notes that Reformed Theology is more than just Calvinism, & *There is a real danger [when] we equate Reformed theology with John Calvin and then equate John Calvin with TULIP, so that “Reformed” ends up meaning nothing more than a belief in predestination.* However, he also ends the article on a positive note, saying *Do I wish many who think of themselves as “Reformed” would go a lot farther back and dig a lot deeper down? Yes. But does it bother me that people think of [John] Piper, [Al] Mohler, and [Mark] Dever as Reformed? Not at all. They are celebrating and promoting Calvin and Hodge and Warfield and Bavinck and Berkhof—not to mention almost all of the rich Scriptural theology they expound—in ways that should make even the most truly Reformed truly happy.*

We do not want to reduce complex doctrines or systems for the sake of simplicity & universal agreement, but we also do not want to isolate ourselves more than those doctrines warrants. Words have meanings, & if we are going to disagree, may our discussions be over the substance of the words, & not merely the words themselves.

*Remind them of these things, solemnly charging them in the presence of God not to dispute about words, which is useless and leads to the ruin of the hearers. Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth. But avoid godless and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, and their word will spread like gangrene.*

*- 2 Timothy 2:14-17*

**Question #1:** Why is it important for individual Christians *to be able to* articulate what they mean by their terminology?

**Question #2:** Why is it important for local Churches to clearly define their terms?