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# WELCOME TO REFORMED THEOLOGY

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## *Introductory Overview*

The term **Reformed** seems to have a fluid definition; everyone has a different understanding of what it means and how it applies personally to the Christian & to the corporate Church overall.

This lesson aims to answer the big-picture questions regarding the Reformed faith: ***What is Reformed theology, & how does it impact my life & walk with the Lord?*** As we will discuss in a future lesson, other churches may define & identify Reformed Theology differently. Reformed Foundations aims to introduce you to the historic Reformed faith as it is believed and practiced by the elders of Christ Alone Church.

This first introductory lesson aims to help us answer these questions.

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## I. One Holy Catholic & Apostolic Church

When we read either the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed, we come across ***the catholic church***.

***We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church*** — the Apostles' Creed.

This phrase may seem perplexing to a protestant, evangelical Christian, especially if they came out of the Roman Catholic Church. However, we must understand that the word ***catholic*** (little “c”) means ***universal***, & has been used by the Church to refer to the single Bride of Christ long before Roman Catholic tradition & doctrine came into existence. We affirm that there always has been, & always will be, one people of God whom He has chosen to redeem & covenant with to make His own. This is why, despite various doctrinal positions within protestant orthodox Christianity, we are part of the one, catholic or universal, Body of Christ.

Even though we differ from other Protestant, orthodox churches in certain areas of theology, worship, and practice, Reformed Christians must not see themselves as removed from the rest of the body of Christ, nor imagine themselves to be the only true Church. We do not seek division from the universal Church, but faithfulness within it.

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## II. What We Mean by Reformed

### A. Not Denominationalism

At the same time, we do not mean that our Church holds to a Reformed denomination, such as the CREC, PCA, OPC, etc. We will dive into Reformed denominations in a future lesson. For now, suffice it to say, we do not mean we are in a Reformed denomination (or seeking to be) when we say we are Reformed.

### B. Reformed Theological Framework

Being Reformed at Christ Alone Church is not primarily a matter of denominational affiliation. Rather, it refers to a theological framework (a set of biblical convictions and doctrines) that distinguishes the Reformed tradition from other orthodox Protestant traditions.

### C. The Historic Faith

When we talk about Reformed Theology, we do not mean all the theology entailed in Martin Luther's ***95 Theses*** from 1517. We also do not simply mean the doctrinal standards taught during the Reformation period itself (generally the 1500's). In the spirit of C.S. Lewis' coined term, we are not chronological snobs, denoting an isolated time period as more correct & superior to others.

Rather, we see the Reformation as an inspiration & influence, encouraging us always to seek the purity of the gospel and to reform both our hearts & minds to the full counsel of God. We do focus on core

doctrines emphasized during this period, such as the Doctrines of Grace, Covenant Theology, & the practice of publicly confessing our faith with clarity & precision. However, these are not simply Reformation-Era teachings; these are biblical teachings.

The Protestant Reformation brought about a rediscovery of the Gospel after hundreds of years of Roman Catholic Church & Holy Roman Empire legalism, corruption, & heresy. Not that the Gospel was lost, but it was a time that God used the Church mightily to reform it out of the corruptions & papal abuses of Rome, and back to a clear understanding of the Gospel.

Think of the reform that happened in Israel under the rule of King Josiah. It is not that Josiah created new standards of holiness that were popular with the people; He prophetically called the people back to the old ways, according to the lost book of the Law that was found during his reign. Thus, the people who sought to reform their lives during this time were reforming according to the Word of God under the direct influence & guidance of Josiah. They might have been called Josiahites, but they were reforming their lives & culture to the Law of God.

Starting with Luther, the next 150 years or so saw a resurgence in the teachings of God's sovereignty in salvation, a proper view of worship, God's work in His people by means of covenants, and bold theological discourse & confessions of faith against heresies that continued to assault the Church. These do not encompass all of the teachings that resurfaced during this era, but they serve as an adequate foundation for a post-Reformation pursuit of Christ.

### III. Core Principles of Reformed Theology

THESE ARE THE BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES & DOCTRINES THE ELDERS OF **CHRIST ALONE CHURCH** HOLD TO. WHILE NOT EVERYONE IN OUR CONGREGATION MAY HOLD TO THESE TRUTHS, THEY SERVE AS THE SPINE OF OUR TEACHING, PREACHING, & EXHORTATION IN THE PURSUIT OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY & TRUTH.

#### A. Broad Definition

*To be Reformed is to hold a biblical view of Christian faith and practice shaped by the principles & doctrines of the Protestant Reformation — a movement committed to bringing all of life, doctrine, and worship under the supreme authority of Scripture to the glory of God.*

#### B. Foundation of Reformed Theology: God & His Word

**THE PRINCIPLE.** Reformed Theology is firstly *theology*, or the study of God. While He has revealed Himself in nature, He has clearly & infallibly revealed Himself in His written Word. The Reformed Christian recognizes that the key theological distinctives recovered in the Protestant Reformation align with Scripture and mirror historic Christian orthodoxy, dating back to the apostles and prophets. Being Reformed is, first and foremost, a pursuit of biblical alignment. To be Reformed is to continuously reform our hearts through the Holy Spirit's ministry in accordance with Who God is as revealed in the Word of God, turning from all unbiblical practices and pursuing biblical worship, sound doctrine, and godly living for the pursuit of His glory. The Holy Scriptures are our ultimate authority for faith & practice.

**THE IMPLICATION.** *And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent; John 17:3.* Our pursuit of knowing God & worshiping Him rightly is the heartbeat of the Reformed Christian. The Word of God is our highest authority, & it provides concrete assurance of truth & direction for our lives. It reveals what we are to believe concerning God, & what duties God requires of us (*Westminster Shorter Catechism Q&A #3*). We rest content that all that is needed for faith & godliness is found within the pages of Scripture. It is the most important book we will ever read.

### C. The Consequence of Reformed Theology: Heart Reformation

**THE PRINCIPLE.** While we may think of doctrinal & ecclesiastical reform, the matter of the heart is the heart of the matter. Reformation takes place because there is first an evil in the hearts of men that distorts the doctrines & practices the Bible calls us to, even after conversion. All theology leads to doxology; meaning all that we know about God informs & directs our worship of Him. To be Reformed is for our hearts to increasingly rest & rejoice in God.

*The part of religion that always needs reforming is the human heart. It is vital that religion and true faith be constantly cultivated. Formalism, indifferentism, and conformism must all be vigorously opposed by a faithful ministry.*

*- Semper Reformanda in its Historical Context,*

By W. Robert Godfrey

This heart reformation is the promised work the Holy Spirit works in us according to God's covenant faithfulness. It is the promise of **Philippians 1:6** that the Lord will complete the work He has started in us at conversion. One of the chief aims of theological reform is the reform of the heart toward God.

**THE IMPLICATION.** We have comfort knowing that God is faithful to keep His promise to sanctify us by His Spirit, & we do not lean on man-made strategies to achieve such holiness. The burden of self-generated holiness is off of us, & we work out our salvation with fear & trembling, but we do so because we know it is God Who is working in us to will & work for His good pleasure (**Philippians 2:12-13**).

### D. The Purpose of Reformed Theology: The Glory of God

**THE PRINCIPLE & IMPLICATION.** A high view of Scripture, God's work, & God Himself mark Reformed Christians. Derived from the Word of God, our theology shapes these principles, which in turn drive our practical worship & practice. Our worship styles, our worldview of God's work in the world, our understanding of salvation & the doctrine of election, our identity as the Church in history, our covenantal understanding as God's people, etc., all contribute to our high view of seeking to bring glory to God in all things (**1 Corinthians 10:31**).

*As stated above, our principles derive from distinct theological convictions. While the principles may be more commonly seen in Reformed & non-Reformed circles alike, the following doctrinal convictions & practices are what fuel & give depth to these principles.*

## IV. Core Doctrines of Reformed Theology

### A. The Doctrine of Justification & the Five Solas

**THE DOCTRINE.** At the heart of these Reformation truths are the doctrines of justification by grace alone through faith alone, in Christ alone, according to the authority of Scripture alone — all to the glory of God alone. Having a tight hold on the biblical teaching of the Gospel is essential. In opposition to these truths, Roman Catholic soteriology teaches that grace is mediated through the Church and its sacramental system, with believers called to cooperate with that grace through penance, sacramental participation, devotion to Mary and the saints, and other meritorious acts. In contrast, the Reformers taught the simplicity and sufficiency of the gospel: that we are justified before God by faith alone apart from works, clothed not in an inherent righteousness within ourselves, but in the righteousness of Christ imputed to us. These doctrines came to be summarized in what we now call the **Five Solas**.

**THE IMPLICATION.** The Bible's clear teaching of justification by grace through faith in Christ alone gives God all the glory. Our man-made logical arguments or attempts to be good outside of God's divine revelation of Scripture are stumbling blocks. The Five Solas & the Doctrine of Justification ground us in humility & reverent worship of the one true God. They establish Christ as Lord & Savior, man as corrupt sinners, and God's elect as purchased citizens of Heaven & children of God.

## B. Calvinism

**THE DOCTRINE.** Sometimes coined after the Reformer John Calvin, the Doctrines of Grace teach that God sovereignly elects & saves a people for His own pleasure & in His own power, apart from any ability inherent within the creature. Rather, we are dead in our sins & cannot come to God on our own without being born again. The Father elects us, the Son pays our debts for us & covers us with His blood, & the Holy Spirit resurrects us & works in us unto eternal life in Christ, all done by the grace of God; hence the Doctrines of Grace.

**THE IMPLICATION.** Calvinism is a personally impactful set of doctrines. They take any saving work out of sinful man & put it all on Christ. We are comforted, knowing that God faithfully redeems us, His elect people, on the basis of His grace through Christ's sacrifice for us. Because God is faithful, He will keep us in Christ, never to forsake us. Being kept in the New Covenant by Christ's blood, God will continue to work holiness in us. We cannot fall away or be turned away at the last day, because Christ holds us fast.

## C. Covenant Theology

**THE DOCTRINE & IMPLICATION.** Covenant theology is the Bible's own storyline told through the promises God makes and keeps. Rather than reading Scripture as a loose collection of stories or moral lessons, covenant theology recognizes that God reveals Himself and His redemptive work through covenants—binding commitments He makes with His people to redeem His people. This Covenant Theology teaches us to read the Bible as one unified story of God redeeming His people in Christ according to His covenant promises.

***“But this is the covenant which I will cut with the house of Israel after those days,” declares Yahweh: “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.  
- Jeremiah 31:33***

## D. Creeds, Confessions, & Catechisms

**THE DOCTRINE & IMPLICATION.** The Reformed Tradition includes holding to historic creeds and confessions, expressing unity with consistent Christian orthodoxy throughout church history. The bible is clear that the faith must be handed down to one another (**2 Timothy 2:2**) in teaching & preaching (**Ephesians 4:11-13**), personal discipleship (**1 Thessalonians 5:14-15**), & family discipleship (**2 Timothy 1:5**). These historical church documents provide a clear standard for the Church's biblical convictions, establish accountability in its teaching, and serve as a guard against heresies — both old and new — that may seek to infiltrate the Church. Catechisms are formative tools in a question/answer format that seek to ingrain doctrinal truths in Christ's disciples by way of consistent repetition. To be clear, creeds, confessions, & catechisms do not create truth, establish new standards of righteousness, or compete with Scripture. They echo, summarize, and confess the truths God has revealed in His Word.

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## V. Conclusion

We know that we are saved by grace alone & not of our works, that God has sovereignly decreed to save us in eternity past, & that we are His one chosen people according to His promises who He has preserved throughout the centuries. This doctrinal framework provides comfort, hope, direction, & purpose. Most importantly, it stirs our hearts up in sincere praise & affection for the gracious God Who saved us & continues to keep us. While our Reformed faith does not set us apart from the rest of the Church, it does give us greater clarity and consistency regarding truths that bring comfort and worship in Christ. Informed by the sufficient & authoritative Word of God, we order our life, teachings, & worship together for our joy in the glory of God.