

# What is Reformed Theology?

Source: Got Question webpage (<https://www.gotquestions.org/reformed-theology.html>)

Broadly speaking, **Reformed theology** includes any system of belief that traces its roots back to the [Protestant Reformation](#) of the 16th Century. Of course, the Reformers themselves traced their doctrine to Scripture, as indicated by their credo of "sola scriptura," so Reformed theology is not a "new" belief system but one that seeks to continue apostolic doctrine.

Generally, Reformed theology holds to the **authority of Scripture**, the **sovereignty of God**, **salvation by grace through Christ**, and the **necessity of evangelism**. It is sometimes called **Covenant theology** because of its emphases on the covenant God made with Adam and the new covenant which came through Jesus Christ ([Luke 22:20](#)).

**Authority of Scripture.** Reformed theology teaches that the Bible is the inspired and authoritative Word of God, sufficient in all matters of faith and practice.

**Sovereignty of God.** Reformed theology teaches that God rules with absolute control over all creation. He has foreordained all events and is therefore never frustrated by circumstances. This does not limit the will of the creature, nor does it make God the author of sin.

**Salvation by grace.** Reformed theology teaches that God in His grace and mercy has chosen to redeem a people to Himself, delivering them from sin and death. The Reformed doctrine of salvation is commonly represented by the acrostic TULIP (also known as the [five points of Calvinism](#)):

T - total depravity. Man is completely helpless in his sinful state, is under the wrath of God, and can in no way please God. Total depravity also means that man will not naturally seek to know God, until God graciously prompts him to do so ([Genesis 6:5](#); [Jeremiah 17:9](#); [Romans 3:10-18](#)).

U - unconditional election. God, from eternity past, has chosen to save a great multitude of sinners, which no man can number ([Romans 8:29-30](#); [9:11](#); [Ephesians 1:4-6,11-12](#)).

L - limited atonement. Also called a "particular redemption." Christ took the judgment for the sin of the elect upon Himself and thereby paid for their lives with His death. In other words, He did not simply make salvation "possible," He

actually obtained it for those whom He had chosen ([Matthew 1:21](#); [John 10:11](#); [17:9](#); [Acts 20:28](#); [Romans 8:32](#); [Ephesians 5:25](#)).

I - irresistible grace. In his fallen state, man resists God's love, but the grace of God working in his heart makes him desire what he had previously resisted. That is, God's grace will not fail to accomplish its saving work in the elect ([John 6:37,44](#); [10:16](#)).

P - perseverance of the saints. God protects His saints from falling away; thus, salvation is eternal ([John 10:27-29](#); [Romans 8:29-30](#); [Ephesians 1:3-14](#)).

**The necessity of evangelism.** Reformed theology teaches that Christians are in the world to make a difference, spiritually through evangelism and socially through holy living and humanitarianism.

Other distinctives of Reformed theology generally include:

1. the observance of two sacraments (baptism and communion),
2. a cessationist view of the spiritual gifts (the gifts are no longer extended to the church), and
3. a non-dispensational view of Scripture.
4. Held in high esteem by Reformed churches are the writings of John Calvin, John Knox, Ulrich Zwingli, and Martin Luther.
5. The Westminster Confession embodies the theology of the Reformed tradition. Modern churches in the Reformed tradition include Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and some Baptist.

**REFORMED THEOLOGY.** The classic representative statements of Reformed theology are found in the catechisms and confessions of the Reformed Churches; *e.g.* the French Confession (1559), the Scots Confession (1560), the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England (1562, 1571), the Canons of the Synod of Dort (1619), the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms (1647) and the Formula Consensus Helveticus (1675). On a secondary level are the writings of the leading representative theologians of those churches; *e.g.* Ulrich Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger of Zurich, Martin Bucer of Strasburg and Cambridge, John Calvin and Theodore Beza of Geneva, Peter Martyr Vermigli of Strasburg, Oxford and Zurich, together with later great synthesizers such as Amandus Polanus (1561–1610) and Francis Turretin (1623–1687).

### **Historical emergence**

Reformed theology developed within 16th-century Protestantism in distinction from Lutheranism. Initial disagreement between Luther and Zwingli emerged on the eucharist, coming to an open breach at the Colloquy of Marburg (1529). Luther's so-called consubstantiation was based on his radical, innovative view of the *communicatio idiomatum* ('interchange of properties' between Christ's divine and human natures; see Christology) as it found expression in the ubiquity of Christ's humanity. Other differences existed but were more of emphasis or else less divisive; *e.g.*, Lutheranism tended to posit more discontinuity between law and gospel, to allow greater autonomy to the civil magistrate and to focus more narrowly on soteriology than did the Reformed. Yet agreement was immensely more extensive. Together with Rome and Constantinople, both held to the ecumenical dogmas on the Trinity and Christology. On the central affirmations of the Reformation (justification by faith, the denial of transubstantiation, the number of sacraments, the authority of Scripture) both were at one. Yet all attempts to achieve theological and ecclesiastical unity failed.

### **Principal characteristics**

***The centrality of God*** is a theme that pervades Reformed theology, which developed under the compelling demand of God's self-revelation in Scripture, its ultimate focus being on the Trinity with a more immediate focus on Jesus Christ as mediator. In distinction from Lutheranism, in which Luther's personal struggles for forgiveness bequeathed a concentration on soteriology narrowly focused on justification, the Reformed attempted to bring the whole of reality under the sway of the supremacy of God. This can be seen as eminently biblical, while avoiding the perils of faddish 'emphases'. The dominance of the doctrine of God comes to expression in a number of ways:

1. Human self-knowledge is attained only in the light of the knowledge of God. For Calvin, we are able to recognize who we are only when confronted by the supreme majesty and transcendent holiness of the living God as he makes himself known to us in his word by his Spirit. Thereby we are made cognizant of our sin and wretchedness, of the depravity that pervades our entire being. This Augustinianism represents in reality a high view of man, since we are seen as moral beings responsible to God, known only in the light of God. Our deep-rooted alienation is floodlit by the greatness of God. Our true identity is as the image of God.

2. Salvation in its entirety is the work of God. Because of the pervasive impact of sin we stand under the condemnation of God, unable to change our status or condition. Hence, Reformed theology has consistently testified to the sole and sovereign activity of God in salvation. Its origin is God's eternal purpose, his sovereign election of his people in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4), a choice made without regard to anything intrinsic in man. Correspondingly, although divergently nuanced, sovereign reprobation was consistently recognized. Therefore, Christ's purpose in incarnation and atonement was to save his people from their sins. His death was not intended to atone for every human being; for then either he would have failed, or the road would lead to universalism, uniformly rejected as unbiblical. Nor did the cross provisionally atone for all while intrinsically accomplishing nothing, leaving atonement in suspense, contingent upon believing appropriation of Christ. Rather, Christ made effective atonement for the sins of all his people (see Atonement, Extent of). Similarly, the Holy Spirit draws us invincibly to Christ. Since we were dead in sin (Eph. 2:1) and unable because unwilling to trust Christ, faith (indeed, all Christian virtue) is entirely a gift of God. The Spirit not only brings us to Christ but keeps us there. The whole process of sanctification and perseverance requires our strenuous effort in faith, but that effort itself is the Spirit's gift. Thus, Reformed theology maintained with vigour at Dort that none of the elect can finally fall away from grace so as to be lost.

Frequently, the mnemonic TULIP (Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance) is used to summarize the Canons of Dort and Reformed theology generally. However, this can present a truncated picture, an abridgement of the panoramic grandeur of the Reformed view of church and cosmos.

3. The whole of personal and corporate life is to be subjected to God. Reformed theology has consistently sought to order the whole of life according to the requirements of God in Scripture. From its beginnings in Zurich, Strasburg and Geneva, strong efforts were made to model civic as well as ecclesiastical life in this way. Reformed theology has been linked with the rise of both capitalism and socialism, with the spread of education, literacy and science, besides revolution in France, the Netherlands, England, Scotland and the American colonies. Correspondingly, greater stress was laid on sanctification and the ongoing role of the law in the Christian life than in Lutheranism. Consequently, Reformed theology has always sought to do justice to the corporate dimension of the gospel and, while increasingly influenced by individualism as time passed, nevertheless maintained this more effectively than other branches of Protestantism. Covenant theology exerted a strong impact in this direction within Reformed theology, since, although the covenant of grace was related to individual soteriology, the notion of the covenant of works made by God with Adam before the fall was increasingly applied, from 1600, to the civic and political responsibilities of nations to God on the basis of a permanent and universally binding law of creation.

**Christocentricity.** In early Reformed theology, exemplified by Calvin, Knox and Zanchius (1516–90), a consistent focus was evident on Christ as the ground of our knowledge of God, as the subject and object of election and, precisely because of the centrality of God, as the immediate focal centre of theology. Later, the impact of scholasticism, with its rigid logical deductivism, and covenant theology, with its preponderant use of the covenant concept (see below), led to the intrusion of other factors which then assumed a place of dominance. At times, attempts have been made to reassert a Christocentric Trinitarianism, in extreme form by

Karl Barth. A merit of such proposals has been to call attention to tendencies to depart from Reformed theology's roots.

**Pluriformity.** Reformed theology is not, nor has been, monolithic. It has possessed creative vitality sufficient to encompass diversity within an over-all consensus. For instance, before Dort differences existed on the question of limited atonement. Calvin was somewhat ambiguous, if not contradictory, on the matter, and may have leaned towards universal atonement. His successor Beza opposed the common formula (sufficient for all, efficient for the elect) on the grounds that it weakened the biblical stress on limited, or definite atonement. Dort, in fact, fashioned a compromise agreement between the powerful British delegation's universalizing tendency and the majority's particularizing concern.

The development of covenant theology indicates diversity too. Begun with Zwingli, Oecolampadius and Bullinger, developed by Zacharius Ursinus (1534–83) and Kaspar Olevianus (1536–87), the movement came to maturity with Robert Rollock (1555–99) and was further elaborated by Johannes Cocceius (1603–69). While increasingly dominant in the 17th century, not all were covenant theologians in the sense of using the concept to structure their theology. Still more was this so before 1600. Differences existed on the nature of the covenant of grace: was it a unilateral and unconditional imposition by God or a bilateral pact with conditions to be fulfilled by man? Most early covenant theologians had one covenant, the covenant of grace. Later, the idea of the pre-fall covenant of works emerged. From 1648 a third, pre-temporal covenant was proposed. Each suggestion had its adherents. Additionally, diversity existed on questions of piety. Puritanism in old and new England was oriented towards praxis, sanctification and pastoralia, increasingly tending to anthropocentrism. Similar developments occurred in the Netherlands and Scotland. This represented a contrast with earlier Reformed theology and with the more scholastically oriented tradition. This pluriformity did not extend to Arminianism, which was proscribed by Dort for undermining the gratuitous theocentricity of salvation.

### **Calvin and Calvinism**

Reformed theology is often called 'Calvinism' due to the towering impact of John Calvin. However, this is not an entirely satisfactory term. First, owing to the above pluriformity Calvin neither could nor did impose his views on others. The autonomy of the various Reformed centres saw to that. For instance, his theology is not shaped by the covenant concept in the manner of later Reformed theology, yet after his death covenant theology became increasingly influential. Second, it is doubtful whether Calvin's distinctive theology, rooted in biblical exegesis, was properly grasped by many who came later. A recrudescence of Aristotelian scholasticism led to a greater reliance on reason and bred a markedly different theological climate, characterized by clarity of definition, rigorous deductivism, greater use of causal analysis and liberal employment of the syllogism. Calvin's more fluid biblicism went into eclipse. Consequently, many scholars posit a dichotomy between Calvin and the Calvinists. This can be overplayed, for, whatever the differences, the parties concerned saw themselves as colleagues not competitors. Despite his antipathy to Aristotle, Calvin did use Aristotelian causal analysis on occasion. However, the reintroduction of Aristotelian logic by Beza, Zanchius and Vermigli may well have encouraged the eventual ossification of Reformed theology by the late 17th century. The living biblical dynamic of earlier days, exemplified by a flood of biblical commentaries and

Trinitarian-grounded systematic treatises based on the Apostles' Creed (Calvin's *Institutes* was one), became straight-jacketed in a rigid, logical, causal system. In fact, the ground was prepared for deism, since God became simply the First Cause behind an immanent causal chain. Despite this, there was still a major contribution to the renewal of Reformed theology in 18th-century North America by Jonathan Edwards.

### Later developments

A revival of Reformed theology occurred in the 19th century in America, where the Princeton theology, spearheaded by Charles Hodge, A. A. Hodge (1823–86) and B. B. Warfield, followed and adapted the scholastic Calvinism of Turretin. In Holland, Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck also made a profound impact. Kuyper took his theology into public life, founding a university, a daily newspaper and a political party, eventually becoming prime minister.

In his massive reaction to liberalism, Karl Barth's debt to the Reformed theology of the 16th and 17th centuries is obvious on almost every page of *CD*, seen in his welcome, if exaggerated, Christocentricity and his vigorous repudiation of anthropocentrism. However, he never entirely eradicated the existentialism so evident in his *Romans* commentary, and represented something of a truce between Reformed theology and neo-Kantianism.

The 20th century has witnessed major application of Reformed thinking to philosophy by, *e.g.*, Herman Dooyeweerd, and the development of a unitary theology interacting with modern physics by T. F. Torrance. Beyond that, Reformed theology shows an ongoing capacity for self-criticism and renewal which bodes well for the future, for, as Warfield argued, the future of Christianity is inseparable from the fortunes of the Reformed faith. Its concern for consistent theocentrism, its comprehensive world-view, and its at least implicit Christocentricity all exemplify its rigorous theological exploration of the gospel, its pursuit of 'faith seeking understanding', and its movement towards the integration of creation and redemption in Christ. Indeed, whenever prayer is offered the church is engaging in Reformed theology, acknowledging what on other occasions its theology and praxis may sometimes deny.

### Bibliography

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