

REFORMED

What does it mean to be a *reformed* church? What do reformed churches have in common with other churches? What distinguishes reformed churches from other churches? The following points explain what it means to be reformed.

- 1) The word *reformed* does not apply first of all to a particular denomination. Many churches that consider themselves *reformed* do not even have that title in their name.
- 2) *Reformed* churches consider themselves to be one branch of the universal church. We recognize that we hold many core Christian doctrines in common with other churches.
 - a) Together with all Christian churches around the world (Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant) we confess the truths articulated in the *Nicene Creed*.
 - b) Together with many churches around the world we confess that the 66 books of the Bible are inspired by God and are the only authority for what we should believe and how we should live, that we are saved (justified) by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ, not by our works, and that Christ sanctifies (renovates) His people by the power of His Spirit.
- 3) The word *reformed* describes a *movement* that grew out of the *Protestant Reformation* in Europe during the 1500s. The reformed movement was fuelled by the conviction that the *doctrine, worship, and practice* of the church needed to be re-shaped, or *reformed* to bring it in line with the Word of God. The earliest leaders never intended to start their own churches. These earliest leaders were mostly Swiss, German, Scottish, and French. There are also notable English, Polish, Dutch and Italian reformers associated with this earliest period of the reformed movement. The reformed movement rapidly took hold in Switzerland, France, areas of Germany, the Netherlands, Scotland, England, and Hungary. The *Puritan* settlers of north-eastern USA were part of the reformed movement. Today the reformed movement is growing rapidly in south Asia and Africa. It is also witnessing a resurgence in the United States.
- 4) The reformed movement is often noted for several *emphases* based on key themes that reformed leaders have discerned from the Bible. These emphases are:
 - a) The ***Power of God's Word and Holy Spirit*** to save lost sinners, to renovate their lives over time, to build His church, and to guide His church. The *Holy Spirit* is the one who gives the Word its power by using it to *convict* us of sin, *bring* us to Christ in repentance, *create* saving faith in our hearts, *guide* us into all truth, *fight* the power of sin in our lives, and *renew* us to be more like Jesus. The Holy Spirit also *speaks* God's word *powerfully* through ordinary and broken people to save and transform others. This explains the *reformed* emphasis on *Word-centered* worship, for example (*Isaiah 55:10-11; Romans 10:14-17*).
 - b) The ***Unity of Scripture*** as the *one* story of God's covenant relationship with His people. In that covenant relationship, God works out His gracious plan to redeem fallen humanity and all creation through His mighty, saving acts which come to a climax in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and to *completion* at the end of human history.
 - c) The ***Covenant of Grace*** as the relationship God graciously initiated with His fallen people in *Genesis 3:15*. This Covenant of Grace between God and His people is a central theme that runs all through Scripture. Believers and their children are still included in that same Covenant of Grace because of Christ's finished work on the cross.

- d) The ***Sovereign Power of God*** to work out His eternal purposes in human history. This emphasis on God's sovereign control of history comes to expression in the reformed doctrines of *Election* and *Providence* (see *Belgic Confession Article 16*, the *Canons of Dort*, and *Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 9 & 10*).
- **Election (Predestination)**: Ephesians 1:1-14 emphasizes that God already chose those whom He would save before the creation of the world. In time, God sent His Son Jesus to die for those He had chosen. As Adam's descendants, we have inherited his sinful nature (Psalm 51:5; Romans 5:12-21). We are born with distorted and rebellious hearts. For this reason, we would never seek God and His gift of salvation through Jesus Christ unless His Holy Spirit miraculously awakened our spiritually dead hearts to the wonder of who God is, to the seriousness of our sin and brokenness, to our need for Jesus and His salvation and to faith in Jesus as the only one who can save us (John 3:1-15; 6:37,44) and free us to submit to God's rule. Those chosen by God and awakened to new life in relationship with Him can be sure that they will never lose their salvation. The Holy Spirit will keep them on the path of faith and obedience. Even when they stumble or wander from the path, He will draw them back again until they reach their eternal home (John 10:27-30).
 - **Providence**: Christians can be sure, whatever happens, that "In all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). God is intimately involved in the details of His children's lives (Matthew 6:25-33). He uses even bad things that happen for His good purposes in our lives (Genesis 50:20). Think about Jesus' crucifixion: God used the greatest evil in history to accomplish the greatest good imaginable (Acts 2:23-24).
- e) The ***Kingdom of God / Lordship of Christ***. Jesus is the rightful King over all creation because He is its *Creator* and its *Redeemer*. He did not only die to save fallen human beings. He died to restore all creation which groans under the curse (*Romans 8:20-22*). In other words, Jesus also died to restore creation from the ravages of environmental pollution, sickness and disease, corrupt government, poverty, oppression, and racial tension. He is making *all things* new. Of course, creation and human culture will not be *free* from these evils until Christ comes again to destroy sin, death, and the devil and set up the new heavens and the new earth. Meanwhile, Christ liberates people from sin, Satan and death to live under His rule again and to be partners in His kingdom mission to restore humanity and creation to life under His rule again (*Acts 1:7-8; Matthew 11:28-30; 28:18-20*).
- f) The ***Calling of every believer***. Christ is busy extending His rightful rule on earth *in* His people, by renewing us more and more to *love* Him and *follow* His will. That is why we pray '*Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*' Christ is also busy extending His rightful rule on earth *through* His people. We were created to serve God by ruling creation in His Name. In Christ, Christians have been saved to serve God in this way once again, wherever God has placed them. In God's eyes, every calling is a sacred and legitimate way to serve Him. The calling to be a teacher, farmer, homemaker, waiter, parent, church member, bus-driver, artist, pastor, musician, mayor, student, receptionist, mechanic, soldier, and construction worker are all important ways to serve God if that is where God has placed you. As believers seek to serve God faithfully in prayerful dependence on His Holy Spirit, *Christ is ruling through them* in their spheres of influence.

Recommended Resource:

Anthony J. Carter. *On Being Black and Reformed: A New Perspective on the African-American Christian Experience*; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, © 2003.