



What Is a Reformed Church?

Basics of the Reformed Faith

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■ “What is a Reformed church?” As the pastor of McLean Presbyterian Church in McLean, Virginia, I was frequently asked this fundamental question during my almost thirty years there. That’s where I began writing a response. And although I am currently serving in a different setting, and almost in a different era than when I started this project, the question is still important to answer.

The McLean congregation started as the Bible Presbyterian Church of Washington, D.C. Through various denominational splits and mergers plus a move to the suburbs, it had become a member of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) by the time I left. But having the name “Presbyterian” over the church door didn’t mean only Presbyterians came. We welcomed people with various spiritual backgrounds, as well as no church background at all. During the years I taught our Inquirers Class, I learned which issues people struggled with in understanding and appreciating core Reformed doctrines and traditions. I often heard,

“Could you explain to me what you mean by ‘Reformed’?” (which is another way of asking, “What is a Reformed church?”).

As I write I have in mind a composite of all the people who have asked me this question. I also have not forgotten my own struggles with some of these issues. I am very satisfied to call myself “Reformed,” and hope you come to that same place

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(although agreement with all the particulars is not a requirement to join the church). But the value of any tradition is that it provides a familiar starting point; it should never give us the feeling that we have “arrived.” I hope my words will be received in that spirit.

A note on my use of Scripture: I often quote only a portion of a Bible passage to help in understanding a point. I do this to maintain the flow of the discussion, not to eliminate your need for more careful study. For that reason I include a reference and encourage you to study the series of verses near the one quoted—what is called the *context*. Using parts of verses apart from their context can prove almost anything. I have tried to use Scripture references carefully, but you need to study them for yourselves. The most important habit or *discipline* you can establish, as a follower of Christ, is to be a student of the Bible.

HISTORICAL ROOTS

The most natural starting place in thinking about Reformed Christianity is the Protestant Reformation. That well-known movement grew out of efforts of committed Christians such as Martin Luther to reform the established church of their day, the church we call the Roman Catholic Church. Luther had no intention of starting a new church; he merely joined his voice to the rising chorus calling for a correction of blatant abuses. Luther’s protest rang with authority, however, based on his own deep searching for biblical truth. He came to the unshakable conviction that, to be faithful to the Lord, the Church must build on the absolute authority of Scripture. It was Scripture he wielded in calling for reform. Luther’s uncompromising stance forced him to leave the Church of Rome in 1520, and the new movement was under way.

Historical Roots ■

Unfortunately, a division occurred after a few years between the new churches associated with Luther (Lutherans) and those reforming in Switzerland and other parts of Europe, which were labeled “Reformed” churches. The eventual leader of the Reformed churches was the Frenchman John Calvin, the principal teacher for the church of Geneva. Calvin’s influence was so extraordinary that even today the terms *Reformed* and *Calvinist* are nearly synonymous. He is usually regarded as the great systematizer of the burst of new insights that poured forth from the leaders and teachers of the Reformation movement.

These insights were the basis for his classic study, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The *Institutes* began as a tract written in 1536 to the king of France, explaining that the “new” religion embraced by many of his subjects was in reality a return to religion drawn directly from the Holy Scripture. The tract was revised and enlarged four more times as Calvin came to a fuller understanding of truly biblical religion. The final edition of 1559 is still studied today. Although he was one of the greatest thinkers in history, Calvin never claimed to be original. In fact, he went to great lengths to avoid being original by testing his thoughts against biblical teaching and the views of the great Christian teachers who preceded him.

What emerged from Calvin’s writing and extensive Bible teaching was the conviction that the Bible, when allowed to speak for itself, was internally consistent and provided a perspective from which every question in life could be viewed. Calvin’s classic illustration speaks of the Scripture as eyeglasses we put on to correct our vision, which is distorted by sin. Through these eyeglasses we gain a proper understanding about God and the world that he created. The underlying principle, which unified everything the Bible taught, was what Calvin called “the knowledge of God.” That term is important

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because, for Calvin, the Bible was more than a revelation *about* God—that is, a book of theology—it was also God’s revelation of himself *in order that* we may come to know and serve him.

Calvin’s influence on the emerging leaders of the Reformation was enormous. For one thing, his ability to show that the basis for everything he taught was in Scripture gave him immediate credibility with all who had the same high regard for the Bible’s authority. Furthermore, because of its careful and systematic development, Calvin’s principles were teachable. The doctrine emanating from Geneva had broad appeal, challenging scholars and peasants alike. During the prime years of Calvin’s ministry, a continuous stream of zealous and gifted young leaders found their way to Geneva to escape hostility against Protestants in their home countries. While in Geneva they added knowledge to their zeal and eventually returned to their homes as careful teachers of the Word, burdened to see their countrymen come to genuine faith in Christ and be reformed into a true church. These churches took different names—Presbyterians in Scotland and Ireland; Puritans in England; the Reformed Church in Holland, Germany, Switzerland, Hungary, and Poland; and Huguenots in France. Despite national and cultural differences they became an informal “family” of churches knit together by common teaching.

John Knox, often called the “Father of Presbyterianism,” is a specific example of Calvin’s influence. Knox fled Scotland and then England, arriving in Geneva in 1555. He served as pastor of the English-speaking exiles while studying under Calvin. In 1559 he returned to Scotland to lead in the reformation of his nation’s church. The Church of Scotland’s theological development is a vital link in our Reformed heritage.

Many Scots Presbyterians immigrated to the new colonies across the Atlantic. A number of them had first settled (often by force) in Northern Ireland and were therefore