

What Does It Mean to be Reformed?

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Preface:

I want to begin with Shakespeare. Hamlet, is one of his many plays. One that most people have heard of or at least read parts of it sometime in their lives. What strikes me about it is how C.S. Lewis used this play to teach about how salvation happens to a human created in God's world. I know this is a Lewis quote, though I'm sorry to say that the address seems to be evading me right now.

"If Hamlet were to meet and know Shakespeare, it would have to be Shakespeare's doing."

So too, if a sinful human being is to meet and know his/her Creator, it would have to be the Creator's doing. Why? We cannot come to know what is holy and sinless while we are unholy and sinful. This shows the truth that salvation in Christ is God's doing from the beginning to the end (this means it is not ours). 1 Corinthians 1:30 affirms this, "By His doing, you are in Christ Jesus..."

"What does it mean to be Reformed?" is a good question indeed, but depending on who you talk to depends on what answer you'll receive because there are currently many different ways to be labeled a "reformed." "Reformed" has historically meant two things: 1) those who hold and affirm the "five solas" of the reformation, and 2) those who believe in Calvinism. These two things are usually believed alongside each other simultaneously. I'll go through each of these two in detail below.

I became a Christian in college, and shortly after I switched my major to philosophy from business. In my philosophical studies I was taught to be critical of everything and not just believe anything printed on a page. I was taught to examine the facts, weigh the evidence, and not embrace anything until I've thoroughly thought it and it's consequences out. As I began to grow in my faith and began to study the Bible, for the first time in my life, I felt that I was not the one doing the examination, rather the Scripture was weighing, judging, and examining me. Ever since those days the authority of the Bible has always had a strong sway on me. Let me give a brief word of caution. I am very happy to call myself reformed, and though this is the case, I do not believe being reformed is a prerequisite for church membership, or even a prerequisite for being a Christian. Some people believe being a Calvinist means you are a follower of Calvin. This is wrong. To quote Jonathan Edwards, "I should not take it at all amiss, to be called a Calvinist, for distinction's sake: though I utterly disclaim a dependence on Calvin, or believing the doctrines which I hold, because he believed and taught them; and cannot justly be charged with believing in every thing just as he taught."

I came to hold my reformed convictions through a great deal of personal struggle and angst with God's Word. It was the Bible that convinced me of these things, not a system. In no way do I want to make you, the reader, feel as if once one becomes reformed you have truly "arrived" at the higher echelon of Christian intellectual thought and practice. But though this is the case, I will try to persuade you all day long that

“reformed theology” is just a synonym for “Biblical Christianity” and that if you reject it you reject Jesus Himself. This is no small matter.

I am aware that thinking about Calvinism is heavy. But I am absolutely convinced that Calvinism is precious. These things are not for fighting about, they’re for real life struggles, issues, temptations, and victories. They’re precious to us because they are foundational to who God is, and therefore this defines everything about us because what we believe about God determines everything about us. These things are precious to me, they’re precious to our elders here at SonRise, and we are doing this seminar because we want them to be precious to you. John Piper says it like this, “The knowledge of God from the Bible is the kindling that sustains the fires of affection for God. And probably the most crucial kind of knowledge is the knowledge of what God is like in salvation. That is what the five points of Calvinism are about. Not the power and sovereignty of God in general, but his power and sovereignty in the way he saves people. That is why these points are sometimes called *the doctrines of grace*. To experience God fully, we need to know not just how he acts in general, but specifically how he saves *us*—how did he save me?” A.W. Tozer once said, “The essence of idolatry is to contain thoughts about God in the mind that are unworthy of Him. The man who comes to a right belief about God, is relieved of 10,000 temporal problems.” For Americans this is hard because we’re so self-deterministic, that for us to have a right (or high) view of God is a miracle of grace. We’re praying God would be doing this miracle among us.

One more agenda item before we move into things. Many people say that theology is a bad thing because theologians try to define the indefinable with a foreign system. This belief says theologians try to place “God in a box.” Nothing could be further from the truth. Deuteronomy 29:29 says, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever...” Did you listen to that? Yes there is profound mystery about God, things that we’ll never know. But that’s not all there is – there are things that are revealed, and what is revealed is for us to know. What’s the difference between what’s hidden and what’s revealed? The Bible. All that is in the Word of God is for us to know, study, and embrace. All that is not in the Bible is not there for a reason – we don’t need to know it. All that we’ll talk about today, you’ll see, are things that are revealed, not things that are hidden. Therefore, to not love theology is to not love the Word of God, and to not love the Word of God is to not love God Himself – lesson? Love theology.

Let’s get onto our venture shall we?

Distinctive One: Scripture

If the reformed tradition did not begin with the Bible, God’s Word, we would be erroneous. Why? Because God is the Author of Scripture, not man. God is Definer, we are defined. The Bible has authority over all of life because it is inspired by God Himself. We must submit to it because when the Bible speaks, God speaks. We should not or cannot presume to set out for ourselves the principles to govern our lives. For God has done it already in giving us His Word which in its principles, touches on every area of

our lives from worldview to how we ought to drink orange juice. A good summary of this mindset is: *God has said it, I believe it, that settles it.* Or as the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it in chapter 1.2, “...all the books of the Old and New Testaments...are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life.” The reformed tradition believes the Bible to be inspired, inerrant, and infallible (see 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:21). This means that the Holy Spirit inspired the Biblical authors to write down what they did, not in a robotic manner, but in such a way where the personalities of the authors were not destroyed but used in the process. Reformed churches believe that because God revealed Himself to us in a book, we ought to labor all our lives to know that book as well as we possibly can. The Bible should be not only known, but studied, dug into, examined, and treasured because in it we meet God face to face. The more we know God’s Word, the more we know God Himself.

Because the reformed tradition believes that the Bible ought to be studied vigorously, they have often found it good and necessary to state what they believe about God and His Word through creeds and confessions. Thus, you may hear any of the following creeds recited within a reformed church: the Apostles Creed (325), the Nicene Creed (391), the Chalcedonian Creed (431), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Belgic Confession (1566), the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), and the London Baptist Confession (1689). Do you notice that most of the creeds and confessions either come from the 4th and 5th centuries or the 16th and 17th centuries? This was due to what is called the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation was led by people, such as Jon Hus, John Wycliffe, Martin Luther, and John Calvin (and many others), who desired not to start a new church but to reform the existing church of their day, the Roman Catholic Church.

What was wrong with the Roman Catholic Church? From around the 4th century up into the 16th century the RCC (Roman Catholic Church) had set up a system of church government, with good intentions, to govern the Church. After a time, this system began to be abused and withhold many things from the common people. They believed the Bible was too advanced for the common man to understand. The RCC’s power grew too great, and the abuses could no longer be tolerated. Enter the reformers as we mentioned above. The reformers wanted to stop the abuses of the RCC and give the Bible into the hands of the common man. Many of them gave their lives for such a task. For example,

John Wycliffe was persecuted and killed by the RCC for translating the Bible into the common man’s English in 1384. John Hus was killed in July of 1415 for translating the New Testament into the common man’s Czech and teaching against the abuses of the RCC. Martin Luther, the Catholic monk turned reformer, stood against the abuses of the RCC and translated the Bible into German around 1520 so the German people could read the Bible for themselves in their own language. John Calvin, a Frenchman who lived in Geneva, Switzerland had a large influence on the Church through his life and theological writings. Calvin’s influence proved to be so large that the word “reformed” is now synonymous with the word “Calvinism.”

Although these men did not want to start a new church, they were forced to leave the RCC and begin what came to be known as Protestantism. From the Protestant Reformation came a large amount of new denominations – Lutherans in Germany from Luther’s influence, Presbyterians in Scotland and Ireland from the influence of John Calvin and John Knox, Puritans in England through the influence of John Owen, and eventually the some other groups (Baptist, Methodist, and Episcopal) came in also.

The “five solas” soon became the battle cry of the Reformation. They are: *Sola Scriptura* (*Scripture Alone*), *Sola Gratia* (*Grace Alone*), *Sola Fide* (*Faith Alone*), *Solus Christus* (*Christ Alone*), and *Soli Deo Gloria* (*to the Glory of God Alone*). These five themes are the five foundations that fueled the protestant reformation, and they still fuel anyone claiming the name of “reformed” today.

These “five solas” were developed in response to specific perversions of the truth that were taught by the corrupt Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Church taught that the foundation for faith and practice was a combination of the scriptures, sacred tradition, and the teachings of the pope; but the Reformers said, “No, our foundation is sola scriptura”. The Catholic Church taught that we are saved through a combination of God's grace, the merits that we accumulate through penance and good works, and the superfluity of merits that the saints before us accumulated; the reformers responded, “sola gratia”. The Catholic Church taught that we are justified by faith and the works that we produce. The reformers responded, “No, we are justified by faith alone (sola fide) which lays hold of the alien righteousness of Christ that God freely credits to the account of those who believe.” The Catholic Church taught that we are saved by the merits of Christ and the saints, and that we approach God through Christ, the saints, and Mary, who all pray and intercede for us. The Reformers responded, “No, we are saved by the merits of Christ Alone (solus Christus) and we come to God through Christ Alone.” The Catholic Church believed a sinner's salvation could be attributed partly to Christ, partly to Mary and the saints, and partly to the sinner himself. The reformers responded, “No, the only true gospel is that which gives all glory to God alone (soli deo gloria) as is taught in the scriptures.”

It is sad to see that today, the Catholic Church still teaches the same essential errors; and much of Protestantism has seen a regress to many of the same corruptions, in many circles and denominations. It is a pressing need for Christians everywhere to reaffirm and champion anew the “five solas” which underlay and gave impetus to the Protestant Reformation.

All of this history is great, and a study of the major figures of the Protestant Reformation would truly do one’s soul good, but do not miss the point of the Reformation. I mention it within the section on Scripture because the main goal driving these men to do what they did was getting back to the Bible itself. This is just as relevant today as it was back then. With issues in the Church today such as relativism, re-defining sexuality, re-defining marriage, “green” environmentalism, gender neutralizing, emergent conversations, prosperity preaching, man- centeredness, humanism, naturalism, philosophies of all kinds, evolution, liberal theology, abortion, not to mention all the

questions that rise out of the new inventions in the medical field and the moral ethics involved with them, economic pressures, etc. we must be grounded in the Word of God if we are going to make it through. If we leave our commitment to be a people centered on the Word of God, we will no doubt slowly slide into similar abuses as the RCC did. If we leave the firm foundation of God's Word we lose our ground to stand firm and without that, we will fall. This is why the first distinctive of the reformed tradition, and thus every reformed church, is the Scripture. All the distinctives below flow out of this one.

Distinctive Two: Divine Sovereignty

The second distinctive theme in a reformed church is divine sovereignty. What does this mean? In its simplest form, divine sovereignty means just that. God is sovereign (1 Timothy 6:15-16), nothing can stay His hand (Job 42:2), He is completely supreme in and over all things (Colossians 1:15-20), He does whatever He pleases (Psalm 115:3), and governs all things according to the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11b). God is sovereign in His creation, for He created all things and all things are sustained in Him (Genesis 1, Colossians 1:17). After reading the creation account in Genesis 1 most people liken God to an artist who creates majestic works of wonder. This is true but not far enough. In order for an artist to make something they need materials to begin with: paint, charcoal, canvas, brushes, tools, drop cloths, lighting, instruments, pen, paper, steel, computers, etc. the list could go on forever couldn't it? This is not so with God, for He created everything (visible and invisible) "ex nihilo" or out of nothing. God is the true artist, whose voice is so powerful and sovereign, when He speaks, creation appears. One application of this is that because God is creative in His works, we too can be creative in our artistic expression.

God is sovereign in His providence, for He not only created all things from nothing, but continues to rule over all things now. The story of Joseph clearly portrays this (Genesis 37-50). In Genesis 50:19-20 Joseph said to his brothers, who faked his death and sold him into slavery, "Don't be afraid, for I am in God's place. As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good. To bring it about this present result, to preserve many people alive." What? God was behind ("meant") Joseph's bad circumstances in his life? Yes. It may be mysterious, but the Bible is clear that God is the One behind the scenes of history, driving, allowing, ordaining, and bringing about all events everywhere for His own purposes. History is "His story" indeed, because if "all things work according to the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11b), then nothing works according to the counsel of our will.

Charles Spurgeon once said, "I believe that every particle of dust that dances in the sunbeam does not move an atom more or less than God wishes – that every particle of spray that dashes against the steamboat has its orbit, as well as the sun in the heavens – that the chaff from the hand of the winnower is steered as the stars in their courses – the creeping of an aphid over the rosebud is as much fixed as the march of the devastating pestilence – the fall of sere leaves from a poplar is as fully ordained as the tumbling of an avalanche."

Does Scripture really teach this? I believe the answer is yes. Here is just a tiny sampling: God Is Sovereign Over...

Seemingly random things: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.” (Proverbs 16:33)

The heart of the most powerful person in the land: “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.” (Proverbs 21:1)

Our daily lives and plans: “A man’s steps are from the LORD; how then can man understand his way?” (Proverbs 20:24) “Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand. (Proverbs 19:21) “Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. . . . Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” (James 4:13-15)

Salvation: “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.” (Romans 9:15-16) “As many as were appointed to eternal life believed.” (Acts 13:48) “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” (Romans 8:29-30)

Life and death: “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.” (Deuteronomy 32:39) “The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.” (1 Samuel 12:6)

Disabilities: “Then the LORD said to [Moses], “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?” (Exodus 4:11)

The death of God’s Son: “Jesus, [who was] delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” (Acts 2:23) “For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” (Acts 4:27-28) “Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief...” (Isaiah 53:10)

Evil things: “Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?” (Amos 3:6) “I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things.” (Isaiah 45:7) “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong... “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” In all this Job did not sin with his

lips. (Job 1:21-22; 2:10) “[God] sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave. . . . As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.” (Psalm 105:17; Genesis 50:21)

All things: “[God] works all things according to the counsel of his will.” (Ephesians 1:11b) “Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.” (Psalm 115:3) “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.” (Job 42:2) “All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done?” (Daniel 4:35)

Before moving on further into God’s sovereignty I have to pause to make sure you know something about the responsibility of man. It may be very easy to talk of God’s sovereignty in a manner that obliterates man’s responsibility, but the Bible does no such thing. In the Bible, God is sovereign and man is responsible, at the same time. The Bible does not lean toward one side more than the other, by saying that “God is sovereign therefore man is not responsible” or “Man is responsible therefore God is not sovereign.” The Bible simply holds them both up, at the same time, and says “yes.” One example of this is Acts 2:23, which says, “This Jesus, delivered up according to the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of lawless men.” Notice that Peter, in this sermon, ascribes the death of Jesus to God’s predetermined plan while calling out the men who killed Him, clearly holding them responsible! This is what I mean when I say the Bible holds both God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility up in agreement. The reformed tradition has always been quick to let the Bible hold these two up at the same time, without giving much explanation as to how they fit together. (For other places that show this see: Philippians 2:12-13, Psalm 2, Isaiah 10:5-19, Acts 4:27-28)

God is not only sovereign in creation and in providence, He is sovereign in salvation as well. *I should warn you, this is the theology within the reformed tradition that brings forth the most debate, conversation, and controversy.* So before I begin to tell you about this rich part of the reformed tradition I want to tell you something. Anytime you read the Bible you make conclusions about God and man, how you make those conclusions determines everything. I want you to come to conclusions about everything based on what the Bible says, not based on what you may think is true, and not based on what you want to be true, no matter what the cost to you. Now we can begin this section.

Jonah said it best. Inside the belly of the fish Jonah cried, “Salvation belongs to the LORD.” (Jonah 2:9) One the key marks of reformed churches is that they believe in a system of doctrine in which salvation begins and ends with God alone. This system (which is usually called “The Five Points of Calvinism”) is described with the acronym T.U.L.I.P., which stands for: Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints. Now, these may be called the Five Points of Calvinism but you should know that John Calvin did not author them himself. Why are they named after him? Let me explain.

Jacob Arminius was a Dutch seminary professor, who studied in Geneva under Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza, and became a professor of theology at the University of Leyden in 1603. In 1610, one year after his death five articles of faith based on his teachings were drawn up by his followers. The Arminians, as his followers came to be called, presented these five doctrines to the State of Holland in the form of a "Remonstrance" (a protest). The Arminian party insisted that the Belgic Confession of Faith and the Heidelberg Catechism (the official expression of the doctrinal position of the Churches of Holland) be changed to conform to the doctrinal views contained in the Remonstrance. The Arminians objected to those doctrines upheld in both the Catechism and the Confession relating to divine sovereignty, human inability, unconditional election or predestination, particular redemption, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints. It was in connection with these matters that they wanted the official standards of the Church of Holland revised.

In 1618 a national Synod was called to meet in Dort for the purpose of examining the views of the Arminians in the light of Scripture. The Synod was convened by the States-General of Holland on November 13, 1618. There were 84 members and 18 secular commissioners. There were 154 sessions held during the seven months the Synod met to consider these matters, the last of which was on May 9, 1619. During these sessions the Synod deliberated and examined the five points given by the Remonstrance. After comparing them with the testimony of Scripture, they failed to reconcile the Arminians teaching with the Word of God. Thus, the doctrines of the Remonstrance were rejected unanimously. But, the Synod felt that a simple rejection was not enough. They concluded that they ought to set forth five points of their own regarding the teachings that were previously called into question.

This they did, and the five points they crafted became what we now call "the five points of Calvinism." The name Calvinism was derived from the French reformer, John Calvin (1509-1564), who had taught and defended these views. It may seem strange to many in our day that the Synod of Dort rejected as heretical the five doctrines advanced by the Arminians, because these doctrines have gained wide acceptance in the modern Church. In fact, they are rarely questioned in our day while the vast majority of Protestant theologians of that day took a much different view of these matters. They maintained that the Bible set forth a system of doctrine quite different from that advocated by the Arminian party. Salvation was viewed by the members of the Synod as a work of grace from beginning to end. Someone once asked me when trying to find out about where our church stands doctrinally, "Is your church reformed or do you believe traditional Protestant theology?" To which I laughed and responded, "We are reformed, and that is traditional Protestant theology."

It is also good to note that many reformed folks have had issue with the acrostic TULIP. For example: though TULIP (in it's order) makes sense, it is not the order in which we experience these things happening to us. If we were to re-order the acrostic based on the order in which we experience these things it would be TILUP. Others have done similar things: Timothy George prefers ROSES over TULIP: Radical depravity,

Overcoming grace, Sovereign election, Eternal life, and Singular redemption. Roger Nicole prefers the acronym GOSPEL (which makes six points): Grace, Obligatory grace, Sovereign grace, Provision-making grace, Effectual grace, Lasting grace. Others like R.C. Sproul merely teach through TULIP while changing the names to other things (for example he changes total depravity to radical corruption, and perseverance of the saints to preservation of the saints. I like TULIP, but I'll teach through it based on how we experience them in salvation (TILUP).

TOTAL DEPRAVITY: By total depravity they meant (and reformed churches mean today) that the sinner is neither willing nor able to repent and believe in Christ on his own initiative. Man is not as bad as he could be (utter depravity) but sinful to the core in all his parts, hints the "total". Man is so sinful that he cannot and will not turn from sin to choose Christ apart from God changing his heart first. Most people have a very bleak view of this doctrine, but total depravity is not just badness, total depravity is deadness to joy and blindness to beauty. Rather than having the oasis that will satisfy us, namely God, we eat mouthfuls of sand thinking they satisfy. A friend of mine once explained it to me like this. "If a lion is in a cage, and you put before him a bowl of meat, and a bowl of wheat, which one will the lion choose to eat?" I replied, "The lion will always choose the meat." My friend then asked, "Why?" "Because," I said, "he would never choose the wheat, because lion's don't eat wheat because of who they are by nature." He replied, "Exactly, the lion will always eat the meat because of who he is. You see total depravity is like this. Our nature, using its freedom of choice, will only choose sin. Why? That is who we are. It must take an act outside of ourselves to change what is going on inside of ourselves." I've never heard it put better than that since (See: Psalm 51:5, Psalm 143:2, Jeremiah 13:23, 17:9, John 6:44, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Romans 8:7-8, 14:23, Romans 3:10-18, Isaiah 64:6, and Ephesians 2:1-3, Ezekiel 36:26).

IRRESISTIBLE GRACE: By irresistible grace the members of the Synod did not mean that God can never be resisted, He can and is. Rather, they meant that God allows His grace to be resisted until He chooses to overcome our resistance, give us a new heart, triumph over our sin, and make us His own. This is what takes place directly before someone chooses to believe and prays to receive Christ, because again, how could one choose Christ if their hearts don't want Him? This grace is described in Ezekiel 36:23-37, and 1 Corinthians 1:23-24. This shows God's commitment, power, and love toward us so that we will be freed from the bondage of sin, and freed to make much of Himself, by enjoying Him forever. This is love defined. Don't lose me here. All whom God calls and predestines will come because they cannot resist His grace once He replaces their heart of stone with one of flesh. Why would they? Before we have a heart of stone we cannot delight in anything but sin, but when we get a heart of flesh we can finally see the beauty of Jesus and cannot resist Him when He calls because everything in us wants Him. (See: 2 Corinthians 4:4-6, John 6:44, Ezekiel 11:19, Galatians 1:15 w/ Jeremiah 1:5, and 2 Timothy 2:25-26, Acts 16:14, 1 Cor. 1:23-24, John 1:12-13).

LIMITED ATONEMENT: By limited atonement the Synod meant that Jesus did not die and shed His blood for every man, but for the elect/chosen/Church only. This does not mean the cross is limited in how many people could be saved, but in how many people

are actually are saved. It also means that on the cross Jesus did not merely open up the possibility for any to be saved, it means that on the cross Jesus purchased actual men and women for God. Fast forward to the New Heavens and the New Earth, all those people that you see around you, the people from every tribe, language, tongue, and nation; they are the elect, the only ones for whom Jesus died. This also is powerfully clear from a covenant view point (whole Bible as a unified whole). If the sacrifices in the Old Testament were only for the sins of the people of God (Israel), why would the New Testament sacrifice, Jesus on the cross, be any different? Indeed it is not. This provides assurance that Jesus' work on the cross secured joy and pleasures forevermore for us in Jesus forever (See: Matthew 1:21, 20:28, 26:28, Isaiah 53:11, John 10:11-16, 17:9, 20, Acts 18:9-10, Ephesians 5:25-27, Titus 2:14, Hebrews 9:28, and Revelation 5:9-10, 13:8).

EVERYONE LIMITS THE ATONEMENT: Many people claim that this doctrine is false and say that the atonement of Jesus is not limited in any fashion, but rather freely offers the gospel to all without exception. I disagree, but that's not the issue here. The issue I want to talk about is that both groups (my group which says the cross was only for a group of humans, and the other group which says the cross is a free offer of salvation to all without exception) limit the atonement. How? Let me explain.

Those who are not Calvinists or not reformed limit the cross by saying; "The cross makes salvation *possible* for all people." The people who are reformed say, "The cross *secures* salvation to a specific number of people, the elect." So the non-reformed person limits the cross by limiting the power of it, and the reformed person limits it by limiting the number of people who will receive it as saving, saying that the cross could save all men, but it only actually saves the elect.

Who limits the cross more? Listen to Wayne Grudem, "*Reformed people argue that it is the other view that really limits the power of the atonement because on that view the atonement does not actually guarantee salvation for God's people but only makes salvation possible for all people. In other words, if the atonement is not limited with respect to the number of people to which it applies, then it must be limited with respect to what it actually accomplishes.*" (Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, page 596, footnote 36)

John Piper too has a word on this, "*It's not a good label. But the "limitation" is in the conscious design or intention of the atonement by God. Calvinists believe that God really means to accomplish, through the atonement, the conversion of a definite (limited) group of people, not just hold out the opportunity to all people to believe.*"

So next time you get angry at a Calvinist, or someone gets angry at you for being a Calvinist, remember, everyone LIMITS the atonement.

UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION: By unconditional election the members of the Synod meant that God chooses those who will be saved before the world began. This is solely based on His choice, not on the basis of foreseen faith. This is why it is un-conditional,

because there are no conditions in God's choice of us. He chooses, not us. You may reply, "I thought I did make a choice to follow Jesus though, didn't I?" Yes, you did. But why did you make that choice? It is not because you conjured up enough moral rectitude to do so, it is because God chose you first and because He chose you, you were able to choose Him. You would not have wanted to turn from sin and turn toward Jesus if God had not overcome your sinfulness and given you a new heart first. Election teaches us how we came to be as we are now, as Christians. Some may at this point may quote John 3:16 or John 6:37 and say well clearly Jesus never taught this because He always invited "any" and "all" to come to Him. True, but again, why would someone come to Jesus? Because God is already drawing them, not because they chose Him in their own sinful nature. (See: Matthew 11:27, John 5:21, 2 Thessalonians 2:13, Deuteronomy 10:14-15, Psalm 65:4, John 1:12-13, John 6:37, 44, 65, Philippians 2:12-13, Romans 8-11, Deuteronomy 7:7-8, 1 Thessalonians 5:9, Romans 9:10-23, Revelation 13:8, 2 Timothy 1:8-9, John 8:47, 10:25-36, Ephesians 1:4-14, Acts 13:48, Deuteronomy 10:14-15, and Romans 8:29-30).

Now some of you may be asking a hard question. If God chose who would be saved, does that mean God chooses those who will not be saved? The answer from the Bible is yes. Before I explain this I want to remind you to make conclusions about God and man, based on what the Bible says, rather than what you want to be true or would like to be true. Reprobation has historically been the doctrine that has addressed this issue. Reprobation is God's sovereign decision to pass over some persons, in sorrow deciding to not save them, punishing them for their sins, to glorify His justice and wrath. This is by far the hardest and most difficult doctrine to accept, because it seems so harsh to people who've been made in the image of God. John Calvin even said "The decree is dreadful indeed." Where do I get this from in the Bible? First of all, as we have said, God acts the same in the Old Testament and the New Testament. In the Old Testament it is clear that God had a chosen people (which rejected all others). It is not different in the New Testament, God also has a chosen people now, although immensely larger. It is massively important to point out three things.

First, there is a difference between how the Bible speaks about election and reprobation. Election is spoken of as a cause for rejoicing, while reprobation is spoken of as something that brings God sorrow (Ezekiel 33:11, Romans 9:1-4). Second, it is important to remember that those who are reprobate are still guilty of not repenting and believing the gospel, and that this is the cause of their damnation. Every person in hell will be there because of their sins and their refusal to follow Jesus. Third and lastly, we need to trust that God does not save certain people because by passing over them He gains greater glory. God can ordain something that causes Him sorrow, while being pleased about the glory He gains from it (See: Jude 4, 13, 1 Peter 2:8, 2 Peter 2:17, Romans 9:17-22, Romans 11:7, Matthew 11:25-26, Proverbs 16:4, and Psalm 76:10).

PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS: By perseverance of the saints the Synod meant two things. First, that Christians need to persevere to the end to be saved (Matthew 24:13), and second, all true Christians will persevere by God's enablement. This is not the same as "Once Saved Always Saved." The mindset of "Once Saved Always Saved" produces a

sinful passivity dishonoring to God. What do I mean? I mean that in this mindset you could live like the devil and still say, “I’m saved, I’m going to heaven because I got my ticket already.” Do you see how passive that is? In perseverance of the saints there is an active obedience that you must have. We must work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12), and we must endure to the end in order to be saved (Matthew 24:13). But in this active obedience we must trust that God is the One causing His own elect to persevere in faith and holy living as He is working in and through us what is pleasing in His sight (Philippians 2:13). This is the gracious “keeping” work of God, through all the affliction and suffering of the life, so that we will not be lost in the end. Praise God that Christ has a firmer grip on us than you will ever have on Him (See: John 10:28-29, Romans 8:29-30, Philippians 1:6, 2 Peter 1:3, Jude 2, 21, 24, 1 John 2:19, and Isaiah 14:24).

You can see why this part of the reformed tradition causes so much stir can’t you? I do think this is Biblical Christianity, and would encourage you to embrace these doctrines alongside me. As I said when I began I am very happy to call myself reformed, but I did not come to agreement with these five points slowly or easily, it took time. Rarely does it happen quickly. God patiently led me through it, and though it was hard to give up such notions as “free will.” But I wouldn’t have it any other way. God gets the glory. I get the joy. Amen.

EVANGELISM AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD: The reformed tradition is often opposed for being too severe in their doctrines of God’s sovereignty in the world, especially in the area of salvation. One of the critiques is that these doctrines do not lead anyone to any kind of evangelistic zeal, or burden to see men come to Christ. This is far from the truth. In fact, I believe one cannot have any hope in sharing the gospel with any person, if they reject the doctrines described above. Here is why.

In Acts chapter 18, Paul is discouraged in Corinth because a group of Jews did not believe his preaching that Jesus was the Messiah sent to save them. Paul says in Acts 18:6, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” Afterwards Paul went to Titius Justus’ house and then to Crispus’ house, preaching the same Christ, and was amazed that all the households believed; along with many other Corinthians. Paul seemed to still be discouraged though, as if the smell of what had happened earlier with the Jews was still heavy on him. God encourages Paul in 18:9-10, “And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, ‘Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.’” It seems like a usual encouragement from the Lord here. He makes sure to tell Paul that He is with him always and even promises safety, which Paul did not often have.

But what makes this encouragement so astounding is what God ends with, “...for I have many people in this city.” What does that mean? Not very many people in Corinth had come to faith in Christ yet. So how could God say that He had many people in this city? This phrase only makes sense when seen in the context of God’s electing purposes in the world. It is because there are elect people within the Corinth that God has chosen

for salvation from before the world began, who have not heard the gospel yet. God encourages Paul to keep on preaching, because of those people. This is simply the outworking of Romans 10:14-17 in which it is clearly said that no one comes to faith apart from hearing the gospel. God was encouraging Paul to be the vessel of salvation for these people that God had chosen from before the foundation of the world, that are now residing in Corinth. Paul was obviously so strengthened by this word from God that he later encourages Timothy in the same manner, telling him to labor and “endure all things for the sake of the elect, so that they may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.” (2 Tim. 2:10) Paul labored and endured all things for the sake of the elect in Corinth. Why? Because the sovereignty of God in choosing people gave Paul hope that God’s Word, the gospel, would never return void, but always accomplish the purpose for which it is sent. (Isaiah 55:10-11)

What does this have to do with evangelism? How does the sovereignty of God empower, enable, and equip us to bring the gospel to the people we live among? Because we to, along with Paul, have this same encouragement from God. No matter where we live, we can truthfully cling to the fact that God has chosen people long ago in our towns, cities, states, and nations, and has ordained that the gospel be preached to them so they can believe. We are invited to be the means that God uses to carry out His eternal purposes. If I did not believe in God’s sovereignty in salvation, I would be so utterly discouraged every time I shared the gospel, because if they do not believe it is my fault. I did not make it clear enough, or try as hard as I should have. But knowing that God has chosen people that will come to faith upon hearing the gospel gives me hope in sharing my faith! It is as if God were taking us fishing and promising a huge catch. It is important to note that because we do not know who these elect ones are that God has chosen within our cities, we share with everyone. When people come to faith, we can know for sure, that it is because they have been chosen from long ago. I know of no doctrine that leads to a greater evangelistic zeal than a promise of a great catch from a sovereign God.

History reveals this as well. When William Carey (the father of modern missions) left and went abroad to share the gospel, he went because the sovereign election of God gave him hope to do so. After Carey a wave of reformed men and women left to do the same. Take heart, and be encouraged to share the gospel with all people, for God has many people in your city, and upon hearing the gospel, they will come to faith.

Certain groups claim Calvinists cannot call men to come to Christ. Nothing could be further from the truth. They say we (I am a Calvinist) cannot call men to Christ because we believe in predestination, and if God has already made the decision and destined some for heaven and others for hell, why is it necessary to call men to salvation since it’s already been decided? Well, apart from this erroneous view of thinking, there is a response to be given.

Calvinists can call men to Christ just as Jesus called men to come and follow Him. Calvinists know that behind the scenes of life, God is working in hearts, and only those that God is drawing to Himself have the ability to come to Christ because after all,

a sinful heart will not want to come to Christ if it is not changed first. Does this therefore mean that we should not call men to faith? Of course not, how foolish to think so.

The difference between a Calvinist and an Arminian calling men to Christ is this. A Calvinist calls men to Christ by saying, "Come to Christ!" An Arminian calls men to Christ by saying, "Come to Christ, on your own." See the difference? The one group believes God does the work in drawing men to Himself, while the other believes man does the work in coming to Christ, which allows God to therefore work in them once they allow it. This latter position is the view of the Arminian, and nothing could be further than the truth.

WAS JESUS PLAN A OR PLAN B?: Also, take some time to think about the implication of this weighty view of divine sovereignty. I wonder if this thought has ever come across your mind? 'If God is God than He cannot be surprised by anything, and therefore the fall of man did not take Him off guard, but in some way because He is sovereign, and governs all things, He was behind it.' Another way to ponder it is this: "Was redemption through Jesus Christ plan B, making it a consequence of the fall of man? Or, was redemption through Jesus Christ plan A, even before the fall of man?" If we say it was plan B, certain implications about God's control over all things and ability to be surprised come into view, and if we say it was plan A, certain implications about God ordaining evil come into view. So was Adam plan A, and Jesus plan B? Or was Jesus plan A, before Adam existed? Which is it?

That is a loaded thought isn't it? This question has been pondered over long and hard by many people ever since the dawn of time it seems. In answering this question, we have two options, and to go ahead and show you my cards, I believe option 2:

Option 1: Satan caused the fall of man himself. If sin originated in the mind of Satan, that means Satan is the cause of the fall of man, not God. This is appealing to many people because they rightly do not want to attribute any evil to God's character. But there are a few things why I would caution you not to hold this view. If Satan caused the fall and not God, then that means Satan did something out of God's will or not in God's control. We know that this is false for 2 reasons. First, it is revealed through Job that God has a leash on Satan, and that Satan cannot do anything unless God gives him permission (see Job 1-2, and Luke 22:31-32). Second, Romans 8:20 says, "He subjected the creation to frustration (futility), not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope." Whoever brought sin, or frustration onto the world had an agenda of hope. That is clear. The question then becomes, who has the agenda of hope? The last thing Satan wants is hope, it is never his agenda. Hope is God's agenda every time! Therefore we can conclude that God caused the fall of man, in hope! Do you see why this first option clearly portrays why Satan could not have been the author of the fall?

Option 2: God ordained sin. If God is sovereign, God ordained sin to come to pass. Nothing happens to which God responds, "oops" to. Many people do not like this however because they think that it automatically puts evil in the heart of the good God, but with Jonathan Edwards I confidently agree, "It is not sin in God to will that sin be." How then did God ordain the fall of man, in hope? Although this is a hard thought to

think on, I think we can get a hint at why God did it; listen to John Piper:

“The terrorized and troubled world exists to make a place for Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to suffer and die for our sins. The reason there is terror in the world is so that Christ could be terrorized, the reason there is trouble in the world is so that Christ could be troubled, the reason there is pain in the universe is so that Christ could feel pain. This is the world that God prepared for the suffering and death of His Son. Look at Romans 5:8, God shows His love for us, He wanted to show His love for us, in that while we were yet sinners, there had to be sin, Christ died, there had to be death, for us. This world of suffering and death exists so that God could love like He could only love in this world.” (John Piper)

God does not permit anything to come to pass willy nilly, but permits everything with design and purpose. We have fallen in Adam, true. But in Genesis 3:15 God makes a promise to Satan that was in His mind before fall happened, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise Him on the heel.” This means that the victory we have over sin and the disease that the first Adam spread to all men was taken care of before the world was created. God for His purpose and for His glory, created a world, that would display His love to the greatest extent, through killing His Son, not because of anything in you, but because the praise of Jesus Christ is the goal of everything.

Let’s get into this further. Now, some of you may be having trouble with this thought. But can you see that this is worth thinking through? The end of this study is increased delight in Jesus. Romans 8:20 says, “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope.” What is clear in this verse? The world, all creation, was subjected to futility, or frustration. It was not subjected willingly, in that it did not want to be subjected to futility. That is clear. What does it mean in the second half of the verse when it says, “because of him who subjected it in hope?” Albert M. Wolters, in his book, *Creation Regained*, says this: “Paul states that the whole creation, not just the human world, was subjected to frustration (i.e., to ‘vanity’ or ‘futility’ or ‘pointlessness’) by the will of ‘the one who subjected it’ (i.e., Adam, through his disobedience).” (*Creation Regained*, page 56) Is Wolters correct? Was it Adam who in fact caused the whole of creation to be thrown into sin? Did Adam sin, eat of the fruit the Woman gave him, in hope? Absolutely not. Adam ate and chose the created thing over the Creator. It was a disobedient act and in it he tried to grasp equality with God (Phil. 2:6). No, it was not Adam. What Wolters does not address is the last phrase in the verse, “in hope.”

If Adam did not do it, who did? It was not the serpent, he was trying to deceive and lie. It was not the Woman, she grasped the fruit in doubt because of the serpent’s influence. So who subjected the world to sin, in hope? To answer this, we must ask a different question. Who had an agenda of hope in Eden? Adam didn’t, the Woman didn’t, the serpent didn’t. Who did? God did. God had an agenda of hope in Eden. God

subjected the world to sin, in hope. How? Why? Do I mean that God let, or allowed, or ordained sin into the world? YES!

I really mean that, and I praise God for it. How? God, in letting sin into the world, opened the jaws that would eventually slam shut on His Son. If sin were not present, Jesus would not have died. If sin were not in the world, Jesus would never have been a man of sorrows, He would never have been crushed for our sins. Read Romans 5:8 carefully, “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” John Piper comments on this verse and says, “God wanted to show His love toward us. While we were sinners, there had to be sin! Christ died, there had to be death!” If sin and death were not allowed or ordained to come into the world, Jesus would not have died on the cross.

This is how God subjected the world to sin, in hope. He did it for His Son. He did it to display Himself fully to us! He did it, because it was always plan A. When sin came in, God did not say “Oops, let’s go to plan b. My Son, you have to die now!” Acts 2:23 and 4:27-28 tell us that the cross was predestined by God. God does not say oops. Albert M. Wolters disagrees and later says in the same book: “There is no sense in which sin ‘fits’ in God’s good handiwork...Any theory that somehow sanctions the existence of evil in God’s good creation fails to do justice to sin’s fundamentally outrageous and blasphemous character, and in some subtle or sophisticated sense lays the blame for sin on the Creator rather than on ourselves in Adam.” (Creation Regained, page 57-59)

I do not say that man is not at fault in Adam’s sin, we are. But behind our sin and guilt, God is at work always planning for His glory. O’ how sweet the praise God is not getting because His sovereign plan of grace is not loved, exulted in and treasured above all! He planned for the death of His Son and planned that grace would flow from it to sinners like me before the world began! Because of this, He subjected the world to sin, to set the stage for His Son. He subjected the world to sin, IN HOPE. With Jonathan Edwards I agree, “It is not sin in God, to will that sin be.”

CAN YOU BE OUT OF GOD’S WILL? I often hear people tell me, “You have to try to get into the center of God’s will” and then proceed to make a comment about someone who they think is not in the will of God. I think a lot when people say these things, especially when they’re said to me. Think about this with me:

If God is absolutely sovereign (which He is), is it possible to be out of His will? Eph 1:11b says God “works all things after the counsel of His own will.” So, if God “works all things after the counsel of His own will” than nothing works after the counsel of mine, right? Correct. Okay, than if nothing works after the counsel of my will, and all things work after the counsel of God’s will, can I ever be out of God’s will? Yes. And no. You see the issues going through my mind now don’t you?

This is a serious question, because if all things work according to God’s will, than what does that mean for sin? Does God, in His sovereignty, allow me to sin? Does God, in His sovereignty, allow others to sin? The answer to this is an emphatic “yes.” In

orthodox Christian theology, it has always been recognized that the will of God is the ultimate cause of all things. In this discussion there has also been a helpful distinction within the will of God, His decretive will, and His preceptive will.

The decretive will, or the will of decree, is the will in which God purposes or decrees whatever comes to pass. No matter what language you use for it (causes, permits, allows, or ordains) it all means that God actively decrees all events, big or small, good or bad, everywhere. Some have called this the ‘secret’ will of God, using verses like Deut. 29:29 to do so. The preceptive will, or the will of precepts (commands), is the will in which God lays down the rule of life for His creatures, indicating the duties He has commanded them to do. This rule is found in the Bible.

Back to our question: Can I be out of God’s will? No, speaking in terms of His decretive will I am always going to be in the place God’s wants me to be, doing whatever it is that I am doing, good or bad. Speaking in terms of His preceptive will, Yes I can be out of God’s will by my disobedience to God’s Word. Now to the main issue this brings to the surface. If all things work according to God’s will, than what does that mean for sin? Does God, in His sovereignty, allow me to sin? Does God, in His sovereignty, allow others to sin? The answer must be YES, God does allow me and others to sin (in His decretive will). When God does this, we must be sure to be responsible with the Bible and take care to say that God does not tempt me to sin nor is God at fault for my sin (James 1:13-15).

Is this hard to swallow? Yes for many reasons, one of which is that this shows that free-will is not an option for Bible believing Christians. Listen to Augustine, he will calm your mind: “Evil men do many things contrary to God’s revealed (preceptive) will; but so great is His wisdom, and so inviolable His truth, that He directs all things into these channels which He foreknew (in His decretive will).” Quotes like this have made verses like Matthew 10:29-31 very sweet to me. It is here that I feast upon my sovereign God, who works all things out in the best possible way for my best possible good (Romans 8:28), and for His maximum glory!

A BIBLICAL VIEW OF GOD’S LOVE: As I said before, these doctrines are the most controversial part of reformed theology, but can see how vital they are for a sound Biblical mindset and worldview? If these are absent man quickly replaces himself as the center rather than God. This is clearly seen in how people define the love of God. What is love? What does it mean to say that God is love, or that God loves us? I think there are two options, one bad and dishonoring to God, and one good which honors God very much.

First, if you remove the above doctrines from you theology and hold to something closer to the beliefs of the Remonstrance above, God’s love quickly becomes man-centered. In this way God’s love is defined as follows: God loves us and makes much of us through the cross, and in response to this, God seems lovely to us. We are the center of His affections and the sole reason He came to earth. Someone once told me that I could see how much God loved me by seeing how passionately He pursues to have me. I

disagree and think that God pursues me, not because He loves me, but because He loves His glory. This man-centered definition of love is hurtful to God and to man because it gives all the glory (the making much of) to man, not God. God is not honored in this love.

Second, if you believe in the above doctrines you will have a much more God-centered idea of love, defined as follows: God shows His love toward us by entering into time and space, dying for us, so that we could be freed from sin, and freed to enjoy God by making much of Him forever. This definition is lovely to God and to man, because it gives all the glory (making much of) to God and not to man. He freed us from what was hurtful to us, sin, and freed us further by giving us what we needed most, Himself. God is honored in this definition. God is love because He relentlessly pursues the praises of His own name in us. By God pursuing Himself in us, we are satisfied because God is the only one who can satisfy, and by God doing this He is glorified. If we say we are God-centered and think man is at the center of God's affections, we are man-centered. "God-centered" is believing that God is uppermost in the affections of God, and that God loves His glory more than He loves us. To be God-centered is to love that God is the most God-centered person in existence. Psalm 106:6, 8 shows why we were saved. It says, "Both we and our fathers have sinned... Yet he saved them for his name's sake, that he might make known his mighty power."

These past couple of pages on the reformed tradition's love for the doctrine of divine sovereignty may have brought up more questions than answers for you. If it has, great. Talk to me, or read some of the volumes and volumes that have been written on this topic throughout Church history. Most of all, I want you to go to the source, the Word of God, praying that God would open your soul to His majestic story of glory that you now find yourself submerged in.

Distinctive Three: Covenant

Now we come to the third distinctive of reformed churches, the covenant, or as others would call it, covenant theology. Covenant theology means that God has always dealt with humanity in the same manner, through covenant. From Genesis to Revelation God says repeatedly, "I will be your God and you shall be My people." This is not a request, as if God were asking people permission to do this. It is a declaration of what God will do because by His nature He is gracious and kind, wanting to draw men to Himself for His glory. This may seem simple enough, but there are massive implications to the central theme of covenant throughout the Bible.

First, since covenant is God's way of dealing with His people, covenant must be the lens through which we interpret all of Scripture. Thus, the Old and New Testaments are not to be looked upon as separate books, as if the Old were a Jewish Scripture and the New a Christian one. No, the reformed tradition has always been eager to see the Bible as a unified whole.

In Genesis we see what is called the covenant of works begin at creation between Adam and God (Genesis 1:28). Adam was commanded to not eat; he ate and failed to

keep the covenant with His Creator. The same covenant moves forward with Noah, only to see his son commit evil and fail to keep the covenant as well (Genesis 9:1-2). Then we see something different when Abraham comes into play (Genesis 12-17). Beforehand with Adam and Noah, men received commands from God, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it.” But Abraham receives a promise, not a command.

Why the change?

This is what theologians call the move from the covenant of works (which men cannot keep) to the covenant of grace (which men do not have to keep). Although the covenant of grace began with Adam in Eden (see Hosea 6:7), it now appears crystal clear when Abraham comes onto the scene. Abraham is told that one of his descendants will bless the nations. We then see Abraham’s descendants (Israel) come into covenant with God on Mt. Sinai (Exodus). Though Israel has godly men, women, and prophets within it they too prove unfaithful to the covenant with God (Judges – Esther). As you follow along throughout the Old Testament you find yourself yearning for someone to come and be faithful to God. That’s when Jesus comes on the scene.

Jesus, unlike Adam and unlike Israel, is faithful to the covenant, and perfectly obeys every part of it. Jesus is the blessed One, the Descendant of Abraham through whom the world will be blessed. When God’s people were faithless, God was faithful to them through His Son Jesus. This reveals to us that Jesus did not begin a new religion or start over from scratch when He came to earth. Jesus brought the Old Covenant to fulfillment in Himself (Matthew 5:17). Much more Jesus was the fulfillment of all that was previously established in the Old Covenant. Adam failed and tried to grasp equality with God by grasping for the fruit (Genesis 3), while Jesus obeyed and did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but willingly emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, to die on a cross (Phil. 2:6-11).

Israel, God’s firstborn son (Exodus 4:22) failed to be obedient to God, but Jesus, the true Israel (Son) of God was fully and perfectly obedient to God. Jesus Christ is announced in Hebrews as the mediator of the covenant relationship (Heb. 7:22, 8:6). The gospel offers Christ, and through being united to Christ by faith we enter into a covenant relationship with God. If you do not look at the Bible through the lens of covenant you lose the unity of the Scripture, and thus, redemptive history as a whole. Thus, the gospel cannot be rightly understood outside “covenant.”

This then makes the Church the covenant community. The preaching of the Word, the practice of shepherding and discipline, the participation in worship together, the sacraments/ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are all signs, seals, expressions, and instruments of the covenant, through which the covenantal benefits and blessings of God pour out onto those who believe. The backbone of the Bible is the revelation in space and time of God’s unchanging purpose of having a people on earth to whom He would relate to covenantally for His glory and for their joy – “I will be your God and you will be my people” implies all of this. John Wesley was often heard saying, “Everyone who belongs to Jesus belongs to everyone who belongs to Jesus.” We are part of a

covenant people that is not isolated to our church, our denomination, our country, or even our time. By being bound to God in covenant we are bound to Christians forever in a mystical and beautiful way that we can never fully understand.

Distinctive Four: The Church

The third distinctive of reformed churches is the doctrine of the Church. It is fitting to talk about the Church directly after a discussion of the covenant, because the Church is the covenant people of God. Because this is so, reformed churches have seen “the Church” in the Old Testament as well as in the New. This is why the New Testament says the Church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:19-22, 1 Peter 2:9-10). One way to see the connection between the Old and New Testaments in regards to the Church, is how the people of God have been governed and led. In order to get there we must do some travelling first.

There are three models of Church government that have historically been used for churches: Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational. The Episcopal model of church government is a hierarchal model, meaning it is a top down model. There are offices distinct from and superior to other offices. At the top there is the Archbishop, followed by Bishops, than the Rectors, with the individual congregations on the bottom. The Archbishop governs the whole thing, while the Bishops govern large areas of churches called diocese, by appointing rectors (or priests) in each congregation. The Roman Catholic Church is the most well known model of this with the Pope, his Cardinals, Bishops, Priests, and congregations. Other examples are the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Anglican Church, the Episcopalian Church, the United Methodist Church, and some Lutheran congregations as well.

You will be hard pressed to find anywhere in the Bible confirming or mandating this model of government, and they agree with this statement. Practitioners of the Episcopalian model believe no form of government is commanded in the Bible. They base the model off of the priesthood in Leviticus 8, and the appointment of the twelve apostles chosen to lead in the New Testament, along with the appointment of the 70 who were sent out in Luke 9-10. Their main argument is an argument from history because it is true that this model of government was in place and functioning as the sole method of government from the 2nd to the 16th century. They often ask, “Would God allow His church be led wrongly for such a long time?”

The Presbyterian model of Church government is not hierarchal, but representative. Presbyterian government has an Old Testament origin and New Testament continuity. Remember our talk on covenant? The whole Bible is a unified whole? This shows itself in Presbyterian government as well. Practitioners of this model believe you must look at the whole Bible, not just the New Testament to see what kind of government God mandates/commands. Numbers 11 is the origin of the Presbyterian model. God grants Moses help in leading the people by telling him to choose 70 men and call them elders. They bear the burden of the people along with Moses. After they were chosen the

Spirit of God fell upon these men, equipping them to lead the people. Sound familiar? Numbers 11 is the Acts 2 “Pentecost” of the Old Testament.

Now, the word Presbyterian comes from the Greek word “presbuteros” which means “elder.” Each local congregation is ruled by a plurality of elders who are chosen by the congregation. The group of elders from each congregation is called a session. These sessions are grouped together into geographical regions and called presbyteries. The presbytery oversees the work of each session in each congregation. Then, each presbytery is governed by what is called the General Assembly, which is made up of members from each session. The Presbyterian model also has the office of deacon. The origin of deacons comes from Acts 6 when the apostles chose men to take care of the physical needs of the people to free them to labor in preaching and teaching. Deacons are not commanded from this chapter, they are deduced from this chapter. They could be seen as a fulfillment of the office of Almoners in historical Jewish synagogues. Those who use this form of government today are: all Presbyterian Churches, the Christian Reformed Church, and the Assemblies of God.

The Congregational model of church government is perhaps the simplest to describe. This model is not hierarchal or representative, but independent. This means each local church is just that, a local church under the authority of Christ governed by itself alone. As you might expect because of the autonomy, or the independent nature of this model, there is a lot of variety from church to church in regard to its governance. The two most often seen models within the congregational system are single-elder congregationalism, and plural-elder congregationalism. In single-elder congregationalism the pastor is the elder who governs the whole church with the assistance of a group of deacons. In plural-elder congregationalism the pastor is one of many elders, who govern the congregation with the assistance of a group of deacons. But, unlike the Presbyterian model, these elders have no authority outside their own congregation, because each church is independently governed. Today congregationalism can be seen in: Non-Denominational churches, Southern Baptists, General Baptists, all other Baptists, Churches of Christ, Bible Churches, and all independent Churches.

It is necessary to note that there has been a resurgence of reformed Baptist churches in the past 20 years in the West. These churches are theologically almost identical to the reformed tradition, and are run by a plural-elder congregationalism. Notable examples of this in our day are John Piper at Bethlehem Baptist Church, Mark Dever at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, and the popular theologian Wayne Grudem also puts forth this view.

Now before we move on, let me give say one more thing about these models of government. Each system’s strength is also its weakness. For the Episcopalian model the strength is the speed at which things get done. For example, if a congregation has become a dead branch, needing to be lopped off, they will do it quickly and easily. The Archbishop gives the order and it is done. But you can see the weakness here as well. If the Archbishop is a corrupt and abusive man, the whole system is shot through with the

same. Simply too much power is placed in one man's hands. The RCC of the Reformation time is a good example of this happening.

For the Presbyterian model the strength is it built in accountability. Each elder only has one vote, even the senior pastor. This keeps all the power from sitting in one man's hands. Even if one man seems to gain an entire session behind him, anyone within the presbytery would be ready to sit and listen to one complaint about the man. Thus, because each individual session is governed by the presbytery and the General Assembly it is awfully hard to get away with anything wrong or unbiblical in this model. The weakness here is seen in that because there is so much built in accountability, things often take a long time to get done in a Presbyterian governed church.

For the Congregational model the strength is its autonomous nature. Each congregation can do whatever it wants, when it wants, without having to go through the offices above them. This can also be its weakness, because an independent congregation can often exist without any accountability from other people, churches, or higher court. Also, whereas a dead branch congregation could be lopped off in the Episcopal model quickly and relatively fast in the Presbyterian model, this type of church would remain in existence for a long time in the Congregational model.

As you can see the strength of each model of government is also its weakness.

Distinctive Five: The Kingdom of God

The fifth and last distinctive of the reformed tradition is the kingdom of God. As we get closer to the New Testament, we see a rising anticipation and yearning for the King to come and bring His kingdom with Him into this world (Isaiah 9:1-7, 11:1-9). This yearning arises out of the despair, suffering, pain, and poverty seen in the world. When Jesus came, He came as this King, bringing and establishing His kingdom (Luke 2:10-14, 4:14-21). But, we still see so much despair, suffering, pain, and poverty in the world don't we? Why is this so? Because although the kingdom of Christ has come already, it has not come in full.

The Church is now waiting for Jesus to come back a second time to usher in His rule in full. Because of this truth, the reformed tradition has historically spoken of the time we currently live in as, "the already and not yet." Jesus has come already, but has not come in full, yet. He has partly brought His kingdom of grace and rule into the world through His bride, the Church (which shows us that the evangelism, church planting, missions, helping the needy, etc. is kingdom work). But He has not brought the full power and authority of His kingdom into this world yet. The Bible speaks of it like this. We were saved when we placed our faith in Him (Romans 10:9), but we will be finally saved at the day of His appearing (2 Corinthians 6:2, Romans 8:18-25). We were sanctified the moment we believed in Jesus (Hebrews 2:11), but not yet because we are being sanctified still today (John 15:1-4). We were glorified the moment we believed in Jesus (Romans 8:30), but not yet because we await the day of His coming when He will usher His glorious kingdom into the world in full (2 Thessalonians 1:10).

This “already but not yet” idea helps us remember there is something bigger going on in the world and that the kingdom of God is more than our own personal stories. Each Christian’s story of gracious redemption is stunning, but it’s not the whole thing. Jesus is up to something in this world, which is why the Church has long prayed, “Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” (Matthew 6:10) Christians therefore rightly desire that suffering of every kind be ended and alleviated. Pain in this world has already been eased in part, because the kingdom is now extending into the world through the message of the gospel. But one day, when Jesus comes back to take His Bride for Himself, all suffering will be erased in full and what has already been established will be nothing comparison when the “not yet” is here.

An Ending Note – Semper Reformanda

After much of the reformation was over, the reformers taught what is known as “semper reformanda” which means “always reforming.” By this they meant that the Church must stand for the Truth of the gospel in each new age in history, but they also meant that how the Church does this will change with each new generation. Why? Because as the world changes, the Church must adapt and be willing to share these same glorious Truths in new ways.

(This essay is my summary of “What is a Reformed Church?” by Stephen Smallman. I have added a few additions of my own in all of the sections. Special thanks to Pastor Chris Robins and Pastor Taylor Rollo. Their additions, and editing eyes have been a massive blessing to me, and I hope to you as well.)