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Robert De Moor

# REFORMED

What It Means • Why It Matters



SECOND EDITION

Robert De Moor

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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# Welcome!

**W**e're glad you're joining us on our brief armchair tour of what it means to be Reformed. Who are Reformed Christians? What do they believe? How are they different from other Christians?

You may have any number of reasons for asking these questions:

- *Maybe you're a new Christian looking for a church to join.* You want to be sure you know what you're getting into, so you're taking a careful look at what Reformed denominations teach and practice. Good for you! It's important for you to know what a church stands for so that you can make an informed choice. For more information and answers to your specific questions, talk to the pastor, small group leader, or person who invited you to this church. They'll be eager to talk with you about Reformed teaching and to refer you to someone else if they don't have the answers you're looking for.
- *Maybe you're considering studying or teaching at a school or college that promotes itself as being*

## FACTOID

A lot of Reformed denominations put the word "Reformed" right in their name. Most of those churches came from continental Europe. Others call themselves "Presbyterian."

Presbyterian churches are Reformed churches that hail from Scotland. While Reformed and Presbyterian churches have adopted some different statements of faith, they all subscribe to the same basic church creeds and hold to the same basic teachings and practices. This book will apply equally well to those who call themselves "Reformed," "Presbyterian," or both.

*“Reformed.”* You want to know more about the contours of the Reformed Christian faith before you decide. You’ll probably want to do more digging, but this booklet may be a good place to start. May God’s will in your decision become clear to you!

- *Maybe you’re a young person who wants to get serious about making public profession of your faith or confirmation.* You realize that your commitment is first and foremost to your Lord and Savior. But that commitment unites you to your fellow believers as well. What’s unique about the teachings and practices of *this* church? Why do you want to make public profession of faith here in the presence of *these* people? We want to help you answer these important questions.
- *Or maybe you’ve been a member of a Reformed/ Presbyterian church all your life, but you’ve never thought through why you travel past ten other churches to attend this one.* Maybe a friend or neighbor asked you to explain what being Reformed really means and you couldn’t give a clear answer. We hope this pamphlet will help—whether you study it alone or in a small group setting.

So what will this booklet talk about? We’ll take a look at the main features of the Reformed version of the Christian faith. We’ll do that under three headings:

- *Reformed roots:* where we came from (chapter 1).
- *Reformed teachings:* our distinctive beliefs (chapters 2-3).
- *Reformed practice:* the way we do things (chapter 4).

Please keep two things in mind as you survey the distinctive features of the Reformed faith.

First, Reformed Christianity is not some kind of sect or cult. Reformed Christians confess that we are only a small part of a much larger body of believers who love and serve Jesus Christ. We're part of a family that includes Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Evangelical, and a host of other churches that confess and practice the Christian faith. This book does not intend to argue that Reformed Christians are better than others. It only tries to point out our distinguishing features—making it easier for you to tell one sibling in God's family from another and helping you find your own place in the body of Christ.

## WORD ALERT

*Sect* or *cult* refers to a religious group with two distinguishing traits. One, they hold unique beliefs that are very different from the mainstream. Two, they believe that holding this set of beliefs makes them the only true believers to the exclusion of everyone else.

Second, Reformed teachings are shared by other denominations as well. What's different is the emphasis that we might place on them. Cornelius Plantinga writes:

Our accents lie more on the sovereignty of God, on the authority of Scripture, on the need for disciplined holiness in personal Christian life, and finally, on Christianity as a religion of the Kingdom.

—*A Sure Thing: What We Believe and Why*  
(Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2001), p. 281

For example, the Reformed faith teaches the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all creation. We can't imagine a Christian church that doesn't hold to that teaching. But Reformed believers place a lot more emphasis on this teaching than many other Christians do. As a result, Reformed believers have invested a lot of their energy and resources in Christian education (Christian day schools, colleges, and seminaries), Christ-centered political/social action, and parachurch ministries to those in need.

As you study this booklet, keep in mind that all Bible-believing Christians share one single language of faith. But, as Plantinga points out, we all speak it



with our own accent. Be proud of *your* accent. Thank God for it. Add yours to the rich diversity of tongues that speak of the great things God has done. And offer your unique expression of your faith back to the one who deserves all glory, worship, and praise. “Through Jesus . . . let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name” (Hebrews 13:15).

# Back to the Beginning

## Why the Church Needed Reforming

**T**wo thousand years ago, on Pentecost, God poured out the Holy Spirit. By the power of the Spirit, Jesus' followers began to spread the good news about him worldwide. Where their message was heard, churches sprang up. These churches lived the gospel and, in turn, spread it to others as well. As these churches matured, they joined together into an organizational structure that helped them support each other, held them accountable, and kept them on the right track in their teaching. For a thousand years churches were more or less organized under one overarching structure.

During that time the organizational structure of the church became more rigid, and some of its leaders became corrupt. By the dawn of the second millennium, power struggles and doctrinal differences between church leaders split the church into two parts: the Eastern Orthodox Church, headed by the patriarch of the Church of Constantinople, and the Latin Western Church, led by the pope, the bishop of Rome. This church came to be known as the Roman Catholic Church.

## FAST FORWARD

Not in the mood to review the “family history”? Skip to the next chapter, “God’s in Charge.” If you do, keep in mind that these teachings were emphasized so heavily because of the historical context. The Reformers, people like John Calvin and John Knox, needed to correct the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church of their day. When the Roman church refused to change, the Reformers *re-formed* their churches to follow biblical teaching and practices more closely.

## SO WHAT

Corrupt church leadership still hurts the church today, as news stories remind us. So always pray for your spiritual leaders, encouraging and cooperating with them where you can—but also keep an eye on them to make sure they stay on track, obediently following God’s Word and God’s will.

By the time the sixteenth century rolled around, many Reformers all over Europe had tried to correct the teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, calling it back to obedience to God’s Word. But the powerful church leadership had managed to suppress these attempts, sometimes even torturing and killing the Reformers.

So what needed reforming? Here’s just a partial list:

- Corruption was widespread among the clergy, especially at the top.
- Ordinary people had little or no access to the Bible and were taught very little about it in their churches.
- The church encouraged believers to pray to Mary and the saints.
- Salesmen for the church went around selling “indulgences”—letters written by the pope supposedly offering people or their relatives time off from punishment in purgatory after death. One of these salesmen, Tetzel, was heard to proclaim loudly, “The minute your money drops in the box, the soul of your relative jumps out of purgatory into heaven.”

During the sixteenth century, though, the church could no longer stem the tide of reform. Many people began to follow and support the Reformers. The Roman Catholic Church could no longer silence these “Protestants.” A number of events came together to place the Bible into the hands of the people in the pew. By having personal access to the Bible, they were able to judge for themselves whether what the church leaders were teaching them was actually true. As a result, many believers followed the Reformers out of the Roman Catholic Church in order to return to the teachings of Scripture.

A number of strands of Protestant churches began as a result of the Reformation: Lutheran and Anabaptist churches in Germany, Anglican (Episcopalian) churches in England, Reformed churches in Switzerland and France, and Presbyterian churches in Scotland—among others. The good thing about all these churches springing up is that they could all reform themselves into fellowships that could live out their beliefs free from the oppression and coercion of the Church of Rome. In fact, that was also good for the Roman Church, because in response to the Reformation it did a great deal to clean up its own act.

What's sad, though, is the way in which this fragmentation—necessary as it may have been at the time—split up the visible body of Christ on earth. All these churches have continued to divide again and again, often over fairly minor differences. This has resulted in a vast array of churches, making well-meaning seekers and new Christians scratch their heads in bewilderment. Which is the real church? Which one should I join? Which one really teaches and lives what the Bible says? In fact, most of them do. But each church brings its own unique emphasis.

### **The Birth of the Reformed Churches**

The *Reformed Churches* formed one branch of the Protestant churches that broke from the Roman Catholic Church of that day. They began in the sixteenth century in Switzerland under the leadership of Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin. Calvin's teachings became the dominant and leading force in these churches as they spread across Europe, particularly to France, the Netherlands, Scotland, and, by the eighteenth century, to North America, Africa, Hungary, Indonesia, and many other parts of the globe.

John Calvin was born in Noyon, France, in 1509. Educated in the humanities, he earned his academic stripes *summa cum laude* at age twenty-four. Inspired by the teachings of reformers like Martin Luther, Calvin took up serious study of the Bible. His education

### **WORD ALERT**

*Protestant* comes from the Latin word *protestari* meaning “publicly declare.” It refers to the public declarations of disagreement with the Roman Catholic Church made by various Reformers.

### **FACTOID**

So what were these events that placed the Bible into the hands of the masses?

- Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press, making Bibles and other Christian writings affordable.
- Education became more widely available so that the average Joe and (later) Jane could read the Bible for himself/herself.
- Reformers translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into everyday language so everybody could understand it.

### **FAST FORWARD**

For a quick and easy way to visualize the church neighborhood as it has developed, take a peek at Cornelius Plantinga's diagram in Appendix A.

## FACTOID

“The Lutheran stream of the Reformation” referred to here was begun by the man who gets the real credit for starting the Reformation: Martin Luther. Luther was a German monk who was scandalized by some of the practices of the church of his day. In those days the pope would send emissaries around Europe to sell indulgences. Indulgences—official church documents that declared that contributors’ future punishment in purgatory was forgiven—were a great little moneymaker for the pope. However, Luther didn’t accept the idea of buying forgiveness, for he knew that only God can forgive sins. And God does so fully and freely for anyone who believes in Jesus—hauling out a wallet has nothing to do with it. Luther wrote down some of his objections to indulgences in ninety-five statements called “theses.” He posted them on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517. The fuse of the Reformation was lit.

and his knowledge of Greek and Hebrew gave him access to what for most people remained a hidden book. His study of the Bible prompted him to write commentaries on almost every book of Scripture. He also wrote a fabulous summary of biblical teaching entitled *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The *Institutes* continue to be widely read and studied, and have been translated into several major languages.

Because he was persecuted by the Roman Church, Calvin had to flee France. He was drafted by another Reformer, Guillaume Farel, to support the Protestant cause in Geneva, Switzerland. There Calvin became an active preacher, teacher, leader, and proponent of Reformation teachings. While in many ways a child of his age, Calvin made a tremendous contribution to helping us understand the Bible and the living faith to which it calls us. We’ll explore more of his teachings when we turn to the distinctive beliefs of the Reformed/Presbyterian churches.

Reformed teaching was introduced to Scotland by John Knox, who was initially influenced by the Lutheran stream of the Reformation. His teacher, Patrick Hamilton, was burned to death for his faith, and Knox himself was captured by the French and forced into hard labor as a galley slave. Once freed, he studied with Calvin in Geneva, returning to Scotland in 1559. In spite of stiff opposition from both church and state, Knox succeeded in establishing what came to be known as the Presbyterian Church.

### So What’s the Difference?

How did Calvin get along with other church leaders of his day? Opposing Roman Catholic teachings of the time, he *agreed* with the other Reformers that

- Salvation is by grace alone through faith, and not by our own good works.

- The Bible alone is the authoritative Word of God for our lives—not church tradition or what church leaders say.
- *All* believers are priests of God, anointed in Christ to serve him always, everywhere, in all they do.
- God gave us two sacraments, baptism and communion, which are signs and seals of God’s promises.
- A priest’s or minister’s blessing of the communion bread and wine do *not* turn them into the actual body and blood of Christ.
- The original sinful condition in which we are born as well as our actual sins are all fully atoned for by Christ’s one sacrifice on the cross.
- Prayer should be directed to God alone through Jesus Christ, not to saints or to Mary. In fact, all believers are both sinners needing God’s constant forgiveness and saints whom the Holy Spirit is already remaking to be like Jesus.

So what were some of the differences that have kept the followers of these Reformers in separate denominations ever since? Here are a few:

- Calvin differed with Luther on how Christ is present in the Lord’s Supper. Calvin taught that Jesus was not physically present but was spiritually present through the work of the Holy Spirit in believers’ hearts. Luther taught that Christ was in some sense still physically present in the bread and wine. Calvin also had a different view of how the kingdom of God actually operates in this present world. And Calvin placed more emphasis on how we should live *as a result of God’s grace* while Luther placed more emphasis on continually experiencing that grace itself.

## **FAST FORWARD**

Don’t worry if this section sounds like Greek to you. Go ahead and skip it if it does. Later we’ll have a chance to examine these teachings at our leisure. For now it’s important to realize that the Reformers agreed on the really important issues, like the fact that God saves us out of sheer mercy and grace because we cannot and should not try to save ourselves. The disagreements between Reformers were relatively minor. But they were significant enough to keep them from forming a single, unified Protestant church. A pity!

- Calvin also differed with Zwingli on the Lord's Supper. Calvin taught that Jesus actively participates in communion. Jesus is our host who actually gives us his grace through the operation of the Holy Spirit. Zwingli taught that Christ does not actually give himself to us spiritually in communion, but that it is mainly our activity in remembering what Jesus did for us on the cross.
- Calvin differed with the Anabaptists on the role of civil government. Calvin saw government as a necessary agent of God to which Christians had to submit and which they had to actively support. The Anabaptists taught that civil government was only for non-Christians and that those within the kingdom of God had to separate themselves from civil society. Calvin also maintained the tradition of infant baptism, a practice rejected by the Anabaptists in favor of believer's baptism.
- Calvin differed with the Anglicans/Episcopalians on many of the same points as he did with the Church of Rome. Anglicanism broke with the corrupt leadership of the Roman Church but retained some of its teachings.

## WORD ALERT

*Salvation* means the forgiveness of our sins and the resulting new and everlasting relationship we may enjoy with God and each other in a cleaned-up, renewed world. *Grace* means the undeserved goodness and love of God by which God gives us what we cannot earn for ourselves: salvation.

## Pros and Cons

Before he went to the cross to earn our salvation, Jesus prayed to his Father:

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

—John 17:20-21

Clearly Jesus wanted the church to be one unified fellowship around the whole world. But through two millennia the church has been fractured into different

groups—groups that often tear each other apart over relatively unimportant things. There’s no denying that the Reformation contributed to this fragmentation. So was it good or was it bad that it happened?

Thoughtful Reformed Christians would probably answer that question by saying it was both. It was bad that the Reformation had to break up the visible unity of the church. But it was good that it did so because the church in those days had gone so far astray. Luther, Calvin, Knox, and Zwingli never wanted to break up the body of Christ. That’s why we call them “Reformers.” They wanted to stay in the church. They urgently tried to get the Church of Rome to *reform*, to become obedient again to the Word of God. That was their aim—not to establish their own brand of Christianity. But they ran out of choices when the church leaders of their day stubbornly refused to budge and persecuted them ruthlessly. The Reformers *had* to break from the existing church. Notice in the verse above how Jesus prays not only for unity but also asks that believers will remain in God. When the church drifted away from God, the Reformers saw no option but to return to the straight and narrow as commanded by Scripture, even when it meant breaking ranks with the Roman Catholic Church.

Where does that leave us? We need to stay true to the teaching of Scripture. That’s the only way we can stay in Christ. However, we should always, always be looking for opportunities to join with other Christians. We should work with them even if our differences will not allow us, yet, to routinely worship with them. We need to keep reaching out to each other as we continue to reach for our Bibles. We may not always agree on doctrine or on how to worship. But there’s plenty we can agree on that God wants us to do in this impoverished, sin-wracked world. So let’s join forces and do what needs doing together. Let’s make our own unique contribution to God’s mission, using the particular gifts God’s Spirit has given us. That way we may be the hands and feet and voice of



our Savior for those who need to share in his goodness. Then we'll still be functioning as Christ's body, and the world will experience God's reconciling love.

As Reformed Christians we want to keep praying both of these: "Lord, keep us obediently in you" and "Lord, make us one." And, to the best of our ability, we'll need to work at both, right along with our Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, and Baptist sisters and brothers.

## Person to Person

*Reformed teaching matters to flesh-and-blood people in real-life circumstances and situations. Here's the first of three stories of people who have adopted the Reformed faith as their own. In telling what they most value about it, they help us to rediscover and celebrate its riches for ourselves. You'll find the other two stories in the next chapters.*

My spiritual identity and affection for Reformed theology is due to the faithfulness of my parents. My parents were immigrants from China who came to America in the late 1940s with the intention of returning home after their studies. War and revolution unexpectedly preempted a return, so I was raised an “ABC” (American-born Chinese) in New York City.

Living in Queens at the crossroads between American and Chinese culture provided interesting tensions. Do I learn Mandarin or play Little League baseball? What role models do I look up to—Bruce Lee or Mickey Mantle? Visiting Hebrew school with neighbors during the day and studying the Heidelberg Catechism with my family at night was not uncommon. Fortunately, my church—a Chinese ministry located in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood—provided a safe spiritual haven from secular society.

The contrast in cultures puzzled me and led me to question why God made things this way. Moreover, my family and church life overlapped in such a way that it was difficult to tell where one began and the other ended. Theological reflection seemed to dominate every sphere of our lives. It dominated conversations at breakfast, youth outings, visits to Yankee Stadium, and mundane drives through the Holland Tunnel. My parents taught me that faith must be lived and not merely assented to. They believed that to be Reformed was a matter of doing rather than merely adhering to a set of beliefs. Intellectual nonconformity was essential since God had endowed us with the capacity for critical reflection. New York City provided a ready context to test Christian ideas about faith, culture, and ethnic identity.

Despite my Christian upbringing and intense church life, I did not yet personally grasp the deep reality of God's self-revelation. It was not until a late winter afternoon while reading the *Collected Writings of John Murray* that I personally grasped the weight of my fallen condition, my redemption through

faith in Jesus Christ, and the wisdom of Reformed theology. It was a real challenge to trudge through Murray's dry treatise on systematic theology. But in a strangely providential way it brought tears to my eyes. To my amazement I couldn't hold back my tears as what I had learned as a youth sprang back into my life with profound personal meaning. Although Murray was discussing the nuances of "effectual calling," what he was clearly telling me was that "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." It dawned on me that special afternoon that all along Reformed theology had simply taken this basic truth and connected it to every sphere of life. Today, knowledge of this plain yet comprehensive truth stills brings me to tears of awe, appreciation, and ecstasy.

—Peter Szto

*Peter Szto is Associate Professor of Social Work at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He was a Regional Director in the Ministry of Race Relations for the Christian Reformed Church between 1999 and 2004.*

# Points to Ponder

1. Were the Reformers right in breaking with the Church of Rome? Were the issues important enough?
2. What should I do if I disagree with what my church teaches or does?
3. Should the Reformers have compromised with each other and formed only one single Reformation church?
4. Should we work toward uniting with other churches, or would that draw us too far away from obedience to God? What can we do to work toward unity?