

Who Are Reformed Baptists?

Reformed

The name Reformed refers to the distinctive historical and theological roots of these Baptists. There is a body of theological beliefs commonly referred to as the Reformed faith. Such great biblical truths as sola fide (justification by faith alone), sola gratia (salvation by God's grace alone), sola scriptura (the Bible alone is the basis for faith and practice), solus Christus (salvation through Christ alone), and soli Deo gloria (the fact that God alone is to receive glory in the salvation of sinners) are all noted hallmarks of the Protestant and Reformed faith.

Yet, the Reformed faith is perhaps best known for its understanding that God is sovereign in the matter of man's salvation. This is to say that God has, before the foundation of the world, chosen or elected certain sinners for salvation. He has done so sovereignly and according to His own good pleasure. Additionally, the Reformed faith teaches that, in time, Christ came and accomplished salvation by dying for the sins of those elected by God. Furthermore, the Reformed faith teaches that the Holy Spirit, working in harmony with the decree of the Father and the death of the Son, effectually applies this work of redemption to each of the elect in their personal conversions. As a result of this emphasis on the sovereignty of God in salvation, the Reformed faith also promulgates the doctrines of grace²: doctrinal truths which set forth the total depravity of man, the unconditional nature of God's election, the limited or particular nature of Christ's atonement, the irresistibility of the effectual call and the perseverance and preservation of the saints.

The Reformed faith, however, touches on far more than these foundational truths regarding God's glory in salvation. It is also concerned with God's glory in the church, in society, in the family and in the holiness of the believer's life. The Reformed faith has a high and God-centered view of worship, regulated by the Word of God alone. The Reformed faith embraces a high view of God's law and of His church. In short, the Reformed faith is no less than a comprehensive world and life view, as well as a distinctive body of doctrine.

Out of this theological understanding came a great stream of confessions and creeds: the Synod of Dort, The Savoy Declaration, The Westminster Confession of Faith and The Heidelberg Catechism. Similarly, this Reformed tradition produced some of the great names of Church history. John Calvin, John Knox, John Bunyan, John Newton, the famous Bible commentator Matthew Henry, the great evangelist George Whitefield, the great American theologian Jonathan Edwards, Adoniram Judson, William Carey, C.H. Spurgeon, A.W. Pink and a host of others all held tenaciously to the Reformed faith. We must underscore that Reformed Baptists do not hold these truths because of blind allegiance to historic creeds. Nor, do Reformed Baptists hold them merely because great men of church history stood in this tradition. Rather, Reformed Baptists hold these truths because Jesus and the apostles so clearly taught them.

The confession of faith embraced by Reformed Baptist churches takes its place among, and is deeply rooted in, these historic Reformed documents. In most places the 1689 Confession is an exact word for word copy of the Westminster and the Savoy. Consequently, the term Reformed Baptist is not a misnomer. Reformed Baptists stand firmly on the solid ground of the Reformation heritage.

Baptist

The name Baptist summarizes the biblical truths concerning both the subjects and the mode of baptism. To speak of the subjects of baptism, we refer to the truth that baptism is for disciples only. Reformed Baptists owe a great debt to the Reformed paedobaptists because their writings have shaped, challenged, warmed, and guided them again and again. Yet, the Bible is not silent about the issue of baptism. The fact that baptism is for disciples only is the clear and indisputable teaching of the Word of God. The subjects of baptism are not to be discovered in Genesis but in the Gospels and in the Epistles. Baptism is an ordinance of the New Covenant which must be understood in the light of New Covenant revelation. There is not one single shred of evidence in the pages of the Old or New Testament to support the notion that the infants of believers are to be baptized. Every biblical command to baptize and every biblical example of baptism, as well as every doctrinal statement regarding the symbolic nature of baptism, proves that it is for disciples only. The Bible is equally clear concerning the mode of baptism. The term mode refers to the fact that baptism is properly and biblically administered by immersion in water. The common Greek word for immersion or dipping is the word used in the New Testament. The argument that the word has an occasional historic example meaning to pour or to sprinkle² is surely special pleading. There are perfectly good Greek words which mean to sprinkle and to pour. Yet, the New Testament employs the word for immersion.

The name Baptist is also meant to convey that only those who are converted and baptized have a right to membership in Christ's church. This is often referred to as a regenerate church membership. A careful reading of the NT epistles shows that the Apostles assumed that all the members of Christ's churches were saints, faithful brethren, and cleansed by Christ. Sadly, many Baptist churches today are more concerned with having a decisioned membership and a baptized membership rather than a regenerate membership. It is the duty of the pastors and people of true churches to ensure, according to the best of their ability, that no unconverted person makes his or her way into the membership of a church.

Reformed Baptist

Reformed Baptists are distinguished by their conviction regarding the sufficiency and authority of the Word of God. While all true Christians believe in the inspiration and infallibility of the Word of God, all do not believe in the sufficiency of the Bible. All true Christians believe that the Bible was breathed out by God and that it is infallible and without error in all of its parts. To deny this is to call God a liar, and hence, to lose your soul. But while all true Christians believe this, all do not seek to regulate the life of the church in every area by the Word of God. There is a common belief, whether it is clearly stated or not, that the Bible is not a sufficient guide to tell you how to do church. This is behind much of what we see in the modern church growth movement and it is founded by and large upon a belief that the Bible is silent regarding the nature and purpose of the church. It is for this cause that many feel the freedom to reinvent the church. For some reason, many believers seem to argue that God has no principles in His Word concerning the corporate life of his people! In these days, the clarion cry of all Christ-appointed shepherds of sheep needs to be that of the prophet Isaiah: To the law and to the testimony! If they speak not according to this word it is because there is no light in them.

Reformed Baptists have a conviction that the Bible and the Bible alone defines what a church is. The Bible and the Bible alone defines the offices of the church. The Bible speaks of their number (two

offices—elders and deacons), their qualifications and their function. The Bible is a sufficient guide regarding what worship is and how it is to be given, as well as who can be a church-member and what is required of those members. The Bible is also sufficient to instruct about what the church ought to do, how to cooperate with other churches, how to send out missionaries, train men for the ministry and a host of other things related to God's will for His people.

Reformed Baptists are distinguished by an unshakable conviction that the church exists for the glory of God. Because the church exists for the glory of God, the worship of God and the Word of God are central to its life. The church is God's house and not man's. It is the place where He meets with His people in a special way. However, this does not mean that it is to be a dull, grim, unfeeling, insensitive place. The place where God dwells is the most glorious place on earth to the saint and it is an oasis to the thirsty soul of a sinner seeking the grace of God. However, the place of God's dwelling is also solemn and holy. How awesome is this place, it is none other than the house of God and the gate of heaven, was Jacob's exclamation in Genesis 28. It is this conviction that explains the reverence and seriousness of the Reformed Baptist worship of God.

Reformed Baptists are distinguished by their conviction that the local church is central to the purposes of God on the earth. The present time is the time of parachurch organizations. It is the time of independently-minded Christians who float from place to place without ever committing themselves to the church. This attitude is not only spiritually dangerous, but it is thoroughly contrary to the revealed mind of God. While many have rightly diagnosed the failure of the church to do its mission, the answer is not to abandon the church, but rather to seek its reformation and its biblical restoration. The church alone is the special dwelling place of God upon the earth. The great commission of the church is fulfilled as preachers of the gospel are sent out by local churches to plant new churches by means of conversion, baptism, and discipleship. Many well-meaning organizations are seeking to take upon themselves the task that the living God entrusted to His church. To whom has God entrusted the missionary mandate? To whom did God give instructions for the discipleship and encouragement and shaping of believers? To whom did God entrust the equipping of the saints and the training of men to lead the next generation? If the all-sufficient Bible answers that all these are the responsibilities of the local church, we are not free to ignore it in light of the status quo.

Reformed Baptists are distinguished by their conviction that preaching is foundational to the life of the church. How is God most often pleased to save sinners? How is God most often pleased to exhort, challenge, and build up his saints? How is Christ most powerfully displayed to the mind and heart? It is through the preaching of the Word of God! Therefore, Reformed Baptists reject the trends of the day toward shallow teaching, cancelled preaching services, the giving of the services of worship over to testimonies, movies, drama, dance, or singing. The Word of God is to be central in the worship of God. Paul warned of the day that would come when professed churchmen would no longer tolerate sound doctrine. He stated that according to their own desires they would heap up for themselves teachers who would tickle their itching ears. The apostolic command thundered forth to Timothy, that in the midst of such mindless drivel he should Preach the Word!

Reformed Baptists are distinguished by the conviction that salvation radically alters the life of the convert. It is tragic that such a thing needs to be mentioned. Today is the day of decisionism. The idea is that one prays a certain formula prayer and is therefore declared to be saved. It matters not whether one breaks with sin or pursues holiness. One can live like hell and go to heaven! What a bargain! Many

popular Bible teachers claim this as a great defense of the grace of God. This is a turning of the grace of God into licentiousness. When Paul describes the conversion of the Ephesians he uses the greatest antonyms in the human language: you were darkness but now you are light in the Lord. And in 2 Corinthians 6:14 Paul asks the rhetorical question: What fellowship has light with darkness? Jesus is a great Savior. He does not leave His people in their lifeless condition. Jesus came to save His people from their sins. If anyone is in Christ he is a new creature. Jesus came to make a people zealous for good works. It is an unbiblical notion that a man can embrace Christ as Savior and reject His Lordship. The word of God nowhere teaches that Christ can be divided. If one has Christ at all, one has received a whole Christ—Prophet, Priest, and King.

Reformed Baptists have a conviction that the Law of God (as expressed in the Ten Commandments) is regulative in the life of the New Covenant believer. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:19 that, Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, keeping the commandments of God is what matters. The present age is an antinomian (lawless) age of Christianity, which makes no demands on its converts, but God's way of holiness has not changed. The law written on the heart in creation (Romans 2:14, 15) is the same law codified in the Ten Commandments on Sinai and the same law written on the hearts of those who enter into the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:33 and 2 Corinthians 3:3). The Apostle John wrote He who says, I know Him, and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. Jesus told His disciples that the way in which they would demonstrate that they truly loved Him was by obeying His commandments. Jesus said in Matthew 7 that many professing Christians will find themselves cast out on the last day because they were practitioners of lawlessness who did not do the Father's will. Among the laws of God none is so hated as the thought that God requires believers to give of their time to worship him and to turn from worldly pursuits. In recent years many have leveled an unrelenting attack upon the Fourth Commandment. The Presbyterian pastor and Bible commentator Albert Barnes once wrote,

There is a state of things in this land that is tending to obliterate the Sabbath altogether. The Sabbath has more enemies in this land than all the other institutions of religion put together. At the same time it is more difficult to meet the enemy here than anywhere else: for we come into conflict not with argument but with interest and pleasure and the love of indulgence and of gain.

John Bunyan wrote, A man shall show his heart and life, what they are, more by one Lord's Day than by all the days of the week besides. To delight ourselves in God's service upon His Holy Day gives a better proof of a sanctified nature than to grudge at the coming of such days.

Modern man is so addicted to his pleasures, his games and his entertainment that the thought that he must give them up for twenty-four hours to worship and to delight in God is seen as legalistic bondage. It is a particular grief to see those who profess to love Jesus Christ shrink from turning from their own pleasures. To God's people, who love His law and meditate upon it to the delight of their blood-bought souls, such a commandment is not bondage, but a precious gift.

Reformed Baptists are distinguished by a conviction regarding male leadership in the church. This age has witnessed the feminization of Christianity. God created two sexes and gave to each a different corresponding role. While the sexes are equal in Creation, the Fall and Redemption, God has nonetheless sovereignly ordained that leadership in the home, the state and the church is to be male. Those whose minds have been unduly influenced by this generation find Reformed Baptist worship, leadership and family structure to be jarring. When the Bible speaks of husbands and fathers leading the home it is not culturally conditioned. When the Bible speaks of men leading in prayer, teaching,

preaching and serving as elders and deacons, Christians must bow with submissive and dutiful hearts. Culture must not carry the day in the church of Jesus Christ!

Reformed Baptists are distinguished by a conviction regarding the serious nature of church membership. Reformed Baptists take seriously the admonition of Hebrews 10:24, 25 to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together. Reformed Baptists take seriously the duties and responsibilities of church membership. In other words, membership actually means something in Reformed Baptist churches. There ought not to be a great disparity between Sunday morning and evening attendance. The same membership is expected to be at all the services of the church. It is impossible for one to share in the life of the church in the manner which God intended and yet be willingly absent from its public gatherings. Few churches would make such a demand, but biblical churchmanship presupposes such a commitment to God, the pastors and to the brothers and sisters.

Adapted from a sermon by Jim Savastio, Pastor of the Reformed Baptist Church of Louisville, KY