

# What is a Reformed Church?

By Rev. Norman Hoeflinger

The Reformed Church!! What's that? It amazes me every time I hear people say this when I tell them that I am a Reformed minister. The name Reformed is more than the name of a church or even group of churches. It does stand for that, but more broadly it stands for the system of doctrine believed by the Reformed family of churches, i.e. Reformed and Presbyterian. This system of doctrine is called the reformed faith. "Reformed" has its roots deep in the protestant reformation of the 16th century itself. It comes down to us as one of the main streams of protestant Christianity, the two great streams being Reformed and Lutheran. To some degree or other all the other non-Lutheran protestant churches have been historically influenced by the Reformed faith. Though religiously and historically ignorant people of today may not have heard of the Reformed Church, it nevertheless has deep historical roots. So first of all, I would like to point out that the Reformed Church is Historical.

## **1. It is Historical**

Calvinism is a synonym for Reformed. This connects the Reformed churches with the life and work of the great Reformer John Calvin. Yet Calvin himself does not stand at the beginning of the movement which bears his name. The Reformed reformation had its beginnings in the independent Swiss Cantons contemporaneously with the Lutheran Reformation of Germany. The same influences that were at work in Germany were producing change in Switzerland. In 1516 the priest Ulrich Zwingli skilled in the Greek and Hebrew Scriptures came to Einsiedeln where he preached Christ and faith in Christ resulting in a change of heart and life. Zwingli did his major work at Zurich where in 1523 for a public disputation he produced his sixty-seven conclusions which included the authority of Christ, as the only high priest and mediator, and the brotherhood and communion of Christians in Him, who made up the church catholic.

### ***A. Fostered and Furthered Individual Freedom, Individual Salvation.***

Zwingli affirmed that Christians are free with respect to works not enjoined in Scripture. He repudiated the authority of the pope, transubstantiation, saint worship, purgatory, fasts and pilgrimages. The deputation that followed resulted in the Council of Zurich deciding in favor of Zwingli and that henceforth all preaching must be based on Scripture. Zwingli then set up Reformed worship. The mass was abolished and communion was given to the congregation in both elements. He emphasized, "How can man be right with God?" Bern and Basel soon followed the example of Zurich.

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We find the fundamentals of Reformed doctrine and practices already in Zwingli. He stood for the overthrow of bondage and totalitarianism and equated personal salvation with personal freedom. Basically Luther and Zwingli were in agreement doctrinally. But the reformation cause became weakened not only by the strengthening of the Papal forces and the persecutions of the Emperor, but by the fact that the controversy over the Lord's Supper arose. Luther adopted the position that "is" means nothing but "is" in the words of the Lord when he said, "This is my body". Luther further formulated the view of the ubiquity of Christ's resurrected body. Zwingli took a more figurative interpretation of "is" meaning "signifies" and that the body of Christ is locally in heaven. For Zwingli the Eucharist is primarily a memorial wherein by faith the believer, contemplating Christ's redemptive sacrifice, received spiritual presence of Christ.

However, it took the genius of John Calvin the Frenchman, trained as priest, lawyer and humanist man of letters, to systematize and give the Reformed reformation its great impetus. Calvin came under the influence of a group of Protestants who were familiar with the writings of Luther. Sometime before 1534 Calvin was suddenly converted and took a stand for Protestantism. When the situation became too unbearable in Paris, he fled to Switzerland. Here in Basel in 1536 at the age of 26 he published one of the few books that have greatly influenced the course of history, that is his "Institutes of the Christian Religion," a compendium of Reformed doctrine. A year later while traveling through Geneva his friend Farel the Reformer persuaded Calvin to remain in Geneva to labor there. Here Calvin spend the remainder of his life, except for a brief period in exile. In Geneva Calvin put into practice, in so far as he was able, all his views on the church, education and civil government. From Geneva Calvin's influence was felt throughout Europe and the British Isles. He labored for the unity of the church and for the healing of the breaks in protestant ranks. He sought to formulate the doctrine of the Holy Super so that it would be acceptable to both Lutherans and Zwinglians but was unsuccessful at bringing about reconciliation. Calvin and Luther were theologically close otherwise. Closer, I believe, than the Lutheran and Reformed Churches have been since the Reformation. The popular verdict has always been that Calvin was a strong-willed tyrant, a gloomy theologian, and one of the narrowest, fanatical busybodies that ever lived. But a serious study of history shows him to be a man of remarkable stature. The influence of his thinking has had resurgence in recent years and his thought is as much alive and contemporary today as it was in the sixteenth century. Of the man himself, Beza his successor has said, "Having been an observer of Calvin's life for sixteen years, I may with perfect right testify that we have in this man a most beautiful example of a truly Christian life and death which is easy to calumniate, but difficult to imitate."

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## ***B. Structured Society in Church and State***

"Calvin's system of doctrine and polity has shaped more minds and entered into more nations than that of any other Reformer. In every land it made the men strong against the attempted interference of the secular power with the rights of Christians. It gave courage to the Huguenots: it shaped the theology of the Palatinate, it prepared the Dutch for the heroic defense of their national rights, it has controlled Scotland to the present hour; it formed the Puritanism of England; it has led the way in practical reforms. His theology assumed different types in various countries into which it penetrated, while retaining its fundamental traits. Henry Boynton Smith, "Calvin" American Encyclopedia.

The above quotation tells the story of the effect of Calvinism in Europe and America. Those who sat at the feet of Calvin in Geneva were quick to spread to their native lands the Reformed faith that they there learned. Among those was the Scot John Knox, one of the leaders in founding the Presbyterian Church. The distinction between Reformed and Presbyterian is simply that Reformed stands for the doctrine or faith of the churches, whereas Presbyterian stands for the type of church government of the Reformed churches.

We see that the Reformed churches are no sect or late arrival upon the ecclesiastical scene but date back to the founding of the protestant churches. The reformed churches have had a great and historical impact on the church on society. Forces of collectivism are now at work.

## **2. It is Confessional.**

### ***A. Thesis of Truth***

The Reformed faith or Calvinism has always been theological and practical. As opposed to those who stress the experiential in religion, the Reformed have emphasized that experience is rooted in knowledge, that is doctrine; and that "truth is in order to goodness." Consequently the Reformed Churches have constantly been concerned with their statements of faith and creeds. The Reformed reformation has produced a number of outstanding statements of the Christian faith from various churches in various lands at various times. One of Calvin's chief contributions was that of organization and systematizing. A penetrating exegete, he brought together the teachings of Scripture into a unified system of doctrine. This has been reflected in the doctrinal standards of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches.

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But before we examine some of these creeds, what are the main features of that system of truth? Scholars have disagreed, but perhaps the most generally accepted is that it lies in the profound apprehension of God in his majesty or we might call it the sovereignty of God. In answering the question how can a man be right with God, Calvin would agree with Luther. "The just shall live by faith." But Calvin asks yet a bigger question. "How can God be glorified?" This has always been its preoccupation of Calvinists and the Reformed Churches... To let God be God and for the creature to recognize his creatureliness and since the fall his sinfulness before the holy majesty of God. God is sovereign in creation and redemption. His sovereignty is based on His unity, self-existence and self-sufficiency, i.e. the self-contained Trinity. God then is the absolute Creator, creating by divine fiat, and rules over the creation absolutely. God possesses all, his kingdom extends over all, and he exercises rule over all, both in the heavenly places and the kingdom of men. God is also sovereign in salvation. This is seen in his sovereign election of sinners to salvation, in the sovereign work of the spirit of regeneration, and in God's free offer of salvation, in Christ to sinners. The corollary to God's sovereignty is the free and full responsibility of man to bring the whole of his life in every aspect into obedience to the revealed will of God.

It is this faith that comes to expression in the Reformed creeds, beginning with the 67 articles of Zwingli up to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. There are two Swiss confessions, the first and second Helvetic. There is the French or Gallican Confession. But the most enduring and still used are the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession and the Canons of the Synod of Dordt, and the Westminster Standards. The most universal of these is the Heidelberg, which presents belonging to Christ as the only comfort in life and in death. Based on the outline of Paul's letter to the Romans it is in three sections:

- (1) How great my sin and misery is
- (2) How I am redeemed from all my sin and misery
- (3) How I am to be thankful for such redemption

It is the standard of the German Reformed Churches and hence of my own Church.

The Belgic Confession by deBres and Canons of Dordt drew the most universal participation in its composition with Reformed scholars from throughout the Christian world present. The Canons of Dordt were drawn up

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against the teaching of Jacob Arminius, spokesman for what is now called Arminianism. It presents the famous five points of Calvinism:

- (1) Total Depravity
- (2) Unconditional Election
- (3) Limited Atonement
- (4) Irresistible Grace
- (5) Perseverance of the Saints.

The Heidelberg, Belgic Confession and Canons of Dort are the Standards of the Dutch or Holland Reformed Churches. The fullest statement of the Reformed faith is found in the Westminster Standards. The Westminster Assembly of approximately 150 divines met over a period of five years from 1643 to 1648 with 1163 regular sessions. It produced a Confession of Faith, Larger and Shorter Catechisms and a work on worship and Church government. These comprise the doctrinal standards of the Presbyterian churches. The 1<sup>st</sup> question and answer of the Shorter Catechism admirably sums up the Reformed Faith: "What is the Chief end of man?" "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."

### **3. It is Scriptural**

The final point that I wish to make is that for Reformed Faith scripture is the only rule of faith and practice. The reformation sought to be Reformed according to the Word of God. It has stood for "The Word, the whole word, and nothing but the word." Hence not only were unscriptural forms of worship and practice abolished but the principle that only what is prescribed in scripture is to be permitted, came into use. The Reformed has always insisted on nothing less than what Scripture commands and allows but also nothing more. Scripture, the written Word, in other words the Bible is the norm.

Zwingli, "professing to rest every statement of his 67 Conclusions of 1525 upon the evidence of Scripture" said in his preface, "If I do not correctly understand the Scripture, I undertake to allow myself to be better instructed, yet only from the aforementioned Scripture." He also wrote, "We teach not an iota that we have not learned from the divine oracle; and we assert nothing

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for which we cannot site as guarantees the first teachers of the church, prophets, apostles, evangelists, Bible-expositors."

Not traditions of man or church but the Word of God is Scripture alone. The Church itself is formed of the Word in the sense that it is based upon the teaching of prophets and apostles received from God and inscripturated. Also for Zwingli the Word is our Teacher as a guide to daily living and personal faith. Reformed Christians have ever been concerned with the application of Scripture to their daily lives. They are students of the Word. For Calvin as well as Zwingli "the Scriptures were his guide, authority and arsenal." By Scripture is meant the canonical books in the original languages. The Westminster Confession states of the canonical books, "all are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life." "The authority of Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependent not upon the testimony of any man or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God." I, III

The final authority then in all matters of faith and life is Scripture, and all questions are to be settled by appeal to it. Also what is derived by "good and necessary consequences" from Scripture is likewise determinative and binding. But where Scripture is silent, men and churches must not legislate. There is a realm of adiaphora with respect to the Christian life.

In matters of Church government also the Reformed Churches seek to follow Scriptural example in so far as the Scriptures give light. Therefore the government of the Church is by presbyters or elders. These make up the Consistory of Session of the local congregation and the Classis or Presbytery on the regional level. Christ is the head of the Church. And rules it as the Chief Shepherd of the sheep. Under shepherds or elders, who qualify according to Scripture are elected and then ordained to watch over the scriptural health of the flock.

The Reformed Churches have held to two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. "A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ, wherein, by sensible signs, Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed and applied to believers." Q92 S.C. The infant children of believers being in the Covenant with their parents are to receive the sign of the Covenant, which is baptism. The Sacraments with the Word are the means of grace.

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The Reformed Churches have held that a true church is distinguished by these three marks:

- (1) The pure preaching of the word
- (2) The right administration of the sacraments
- (3) The exercise of Church Discipline

## **Reformed Church in the US, State of Reformed Churches Today**

In conclusion I would briefly mention the history of my present Church and the state of the Reformed Churches in the world today.

The teaching of Zwingli and Calvin passed over into Germany, especially in the Palatinate under Elector Fredrich III who caused the Heidelberg Catechism to be published in 1563. Colonists from the Palatinate settled in this country and under the authority of the Dutch Reformed Church organized in 1725 in White Marsh, Pennsylvania. The connection with the Dutch was later severed as the church grew. Seminaries were started and Mercersburg became famous with John Williamson Nevin and Philip Schaff as the principle advocates of what is known as Mecersberg Theology, which claimed the "spiritual real presence" of Christ in the Supper. A liturgical movement caused some controversy in the Church although worship was generally simple in this area, with the practice of standing for prayer and sitting for singing. There are liturgies for the sacraments and ordinances. Confirmation is practiced as a public profession of faith.

A seminary was also founded at Franklin, Wisconsin, the Mission House, which served the area. The German Reformed Christians were Calvinistic in doctrine, but being German, they were also partially influenced by Lutheranism. In 1934 The Reformed (German) Church in the U.S. united with the Evangelical Church, another German Church which was at least partly Lutheran in doctrine and this formed the Evangelical and Reformed Church. In this church the Heidelberg and Lutheran Catechisms are used. This church has since merged with the Congregational Christian Churches.

Eureka Classis, of which I am a member, did NOT participate in the union of 1934 but preferred to remain separately and continue, Reformed. It is the continuing body of the Reformed Church in the U.S. and bears that name. It exists mainly in the Dakotas.

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Today there are Reformed Churches in most of the World. In the U.S.: Presbyterian denominations, RCA., CRC, RCUS. A Presbyterian Church in Canada, Scotland is Presbyterian. There is a Presbyterian church in England. There is a Reformed church in Switzerland and to some extent in Germany. I read recently where a truly Reformed Church is forming in France. There are also Presbyterian or Reformed churches in South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Korea, and Japan.

Besides the Reformed Churches the reformed faith was the basic doctrine of the Congregational churches. The 39 Articles of the Church of England, Episcopal, were Reformed. There have been many Baptist Churches and preachers who were Calvinists, e.g. Spurgeon.

The condition of the Reformed Churches today is much like that of the other churches. There are conservatives and liberal elements, staunch traditional Calvinists, but also neo-Calvinists who following Karl Barth have sought to reinterpret the Reformers. What the future holds for the Reformed Churches is of course impossible to say, but may have expressed themselves by saying that the hope of the Christian world lies with a resurgence of the Reformed Faith. Let me summarize that faith with this motto: The Word, the whole Word, nothing but the Word; Grace, entire Grace, and nothing but Grace; Christ, the whole Christ, nothing but Christ. If you will allow me my bias I will quote Dr. B.B. Warfield of Princeton who said the Reformed Faith is "Biblical Christianity come into its own."

- *Rev. Norman Hoeflinger, October 28, 1965*