

1. Why Study Reformed Theology?

Maybe you picked up this book knowing about Reformed theology already, but maybe you've stumbled across it and want to find out what 'Reformed' even is. Either way, I hope you'll see the significance of understanding God's Word through a Reformed lens.

Christianity is the most revolutionary movement the world has ever known. It overturns the kingdom of darkness as the reign of God comes to bear upon all creation in Jesus Christ (Col. 2:13-15). It destroys the power of Satan and sin as Jesus rules over his kingdom throughout this age until he defeats all his enemies (1 Cor.15:24-28). It upends even death itself, since Christ's final victory will be to raise all his people from our graves into everlasting, glorious life when he returns to complete the installation of his heavenly kingdom on earth (1 Cor. 15:50-58).

Cosmic and astounding realities are therefore tied into the Christian faith.

Reformed theology tries to explain all these grand ideas about God's work, Christ's saving power, and our future in application to how everyday Christians live life before God. The churches in the Reformed heritage are often well known for their belief in God's work of predestination.¹ Still, that doctrine is only one of our beliefs among many. That teaching is close to our hearts because it shows us how God's love for his people is something that transcends time. Even as that one doctrine takes us into the riches of eternity, many other teachings in Reformed theology are equally precious to us and point us to how we can connect with God in simple ways.

INVESTIGATING REFORMED THEOLOGY

When I was in high school, a close friend started exploring something called 'Calvinism.' Even though I had grown up in church, I knew little about what she was discussing. Although I believed God is ultimately in control, the things she said about his sovereignty² in salvation

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1. Words throughout the book which have been underlined will be defined in Appendix C: Glossary.
 2. A basic understanding of 'sovereignty' teaches that God reigns and rules over all things.

greatly upset me. Although I grew up going to church, I had hardly read the Bible. So, I set out to read Scripture to disprove this stuff about predestination that seemed like nonsense at the time.

To my great surprise, in my early years at university, I learned to love God and the gospel of Jesus Christ with new wonder because I became convinced of Reformed theology. New friends who knew God's Word much better asked me hard questions about my life with Christ. I was pushed to take my faith more seriously and to study Scripture with greater diligence. As I did, I saw more about the depths of my sin and about the extravagance of God's grace for us in Jesus Christ.

My questions about predestination were pushed aside as I learned more about what grace is and how God provides it in Christ. I was amazed that the Bible taught so many things about God and his work. I had never realized that doctrine had so much to do with my relationship with God. The amazing thing was that my thoughts were being reshaped to see God's glory and majesty as the starting point of how I relate to him. God is so kind to let us experience his goodness and grandeur.

As I learned more about how God has done so many amazing things for his people and walks with us to guide and help us in our lives now, my objections to those teachings that I had so associated with Reformed theology started to lessen. Then, as I was reading through Exodus with a group of other students, I came across something that surprised me. Exodus 4:21 says, 'And the Lord said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. *But I will harden his heart*, so that he will not let the people go.'" God would harden someone's heart? I shrugged it off as if the meaning was impossible to know.

A few days later, I was stuck again: 'But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment' (Exod. 7:3-4). It struck me now that God had said this hard truth about how he judges sinners sometimes, but it was clearer that God was also using that hard truth to work for his people's good. What if the Bible did teach some hard truths that I had found so objectionable? But

what if I had made them more objectionable by missing how they put a spotlight on *God's grace*?

I remember the moment when I became happy to call myself 'Reformed.' I sat cross-legged on the floor in my room, reading my Bible on a short table in front of me. I came to John 6:43–44: 'Jesus answered them, "Do not grumble among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.'" When I read that no one comes to Christ unless the Father draws them to believe and that all who come to Christ *in this way* are guaranteed everlasting life when Christ returns to raise all his people from the grave, all my principled objections collapsed.

A few things still strike me about these verses in John's Gospel. First, as Jesus teaches the crowd in this 'bread of life' discourse, they clearly do not like what he is saying. Their dislike for his words explains why he told them not to grumble. It seems that people have never been immediately fond of teaching about God's sovereignty in salvation.

Second, Jesus' teaching focused on grace. The accusation that Reformed theology includes harsh teaching is not entirely fair. Scripture teaches lots of hard truths, and Reformed theology affirms them all! The best expressions of Reformed

theology have always tried to show how God's sovereignty in salvation was more about how rich and abundant his grace and love are. It's worth thinking a little more about this emphasis in Reformed theology.

GRACE SHOULD BE IN BOLD AND UNDERLINED

The astonishing thing about Jesus teaching that no one comes to him unless the Father draws them to have faith in Christ is that it means that God uses his sovereign power to save those who need him. It used to bother me as a kid when my grandmother would correct my grammar. One of her lessons is important in order to see Jesus' point clearly. Even if you're not a fan of grammar, hang with me one second.

That grammar lesson is the difference between 'can' and 'may.' I used to ask my grandmother things like, 'Can I have a piece of cake?' Without fail, she would reply, 'I don't know, can you?' Feel free to roll your eyes, because we've all had this happen to us, I'm sure. Eventually, she'd explain that I should ask: '*May* I have a piece of cake?' What's the significance? Well, 'can' is about what we are able to do, but 'may' is about what we have permission to do.

In John 6:44, Jesus didn't say that no one *may* come to him but that no one *can* come to him. Everyone has permission to go to Jesus for salvation. He welcomes anyone who seeks after him to be their Savior. The trouble is, as Paul says in Romans 3:11, 'no one seeks for God.' We don't seek for God because, even though we have permission, we as sinners don't have ability. Our sin has so damaged us that we don't want to turn to God for his grace and we don't have the ability to change our spiritual condition.

In Ephesians 2:1-10, Paul shows how this point displays God's goodness to us. He described our problem that we 'were dead in the trespasses and sins' (Eph. 2:1). I'll state the obvious: it's bad news to be dead. You can't help yourself in the slightest. In theology, however, bad news helps spotlight the good news. Paul drew upon this bad news to show how good God is in being kind to sinners: 'But God, *being rich in mercy*, because of *the great love with which he loved us*, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved' (Eph. 2:4-5). God has saved us by grace, showering us with mercy and love, even though we could do none of it for ourselves.

The point is that, if we were going to come to Christ, God had to draw us sovereignly to faith. We sinners, who were dead, would never have believed in Jesus had God not chosen to change our hearts. We had permission to go to Jesus ... but as dead people, we had no ability.

For these reasons, Reformed theology has an excellent summary of our beliefs in Ephesians 2:8–10:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Paul's emphasis on grace is clear as he helps us see that God's kindness is thorough in saving us by faith. When he said, 'this is not of your own doing; it is the gift of God,' he meant that faith was also given to us by God. God draws us to Christ and gives us faith. He does so because he is kind to help those who could not help themselves and to rescue us even when our hearts were totally dead. God is the one who does the whole work of

salvation. We are *his* workmanship, created anew in Christ Jesus.

THE EXPERIENCE OF GRACE

These truths about God's grace connect home in our lives. The Lord's grace to us in Jesus Christ comes to fruition, as Paul said, in that God did not save us *by* works but *for* works. He prepared good things in advance for us to accomplish as his redeemed servants.

This book isn't about everything about the Christian life. One thing I hope you take away, though, is that we experience grace through our renewed lives. Jesus gives us everlasting life freely. He frees us from the penalty of sin, so that we are reconciled to God. He also frees us from the power of sin, so that we might be increasingly released from that which makes us miserable.

We experience God's grace in an ongoing fashion in the Christian life. Reformed theology is not about arcane ideas concerning eternity; it's about connecting God's grace to how we live with God in our lives.

The other aspect of experiencing God's grace has to do with God's community. Reformed theology is most known for its teaching on salvation. It is equally emphatic both that God

saves you by his sovereign grace and that he saves you into a community.

Have you ever walked into a crowded room and felt insecure? Maybe you walked into the school cafeteria or arrived at a party and didn't see any friends. The feelings of being alone or not belonging can be painful. In our generation, people feel less and less like they belong somewhere. Personal identity is a major problem, partly because we all struggle to know where we fit in. God has a solution for this problem.

God made the church as his community of grace. Yes, we are personally saved. Yet we experience God's grace even more as we participate in his community of blessing. This book hopes to show how God's grace connects to our experience of grace in the church.

Reformed theology is about the importance of God's grace and his love. Our goal going forward is to show how God's love and grace connect with our lives as these truths have been explained by Reformed churches.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Reformed theology is about experiencing God's grace in salvation and in the Christian life.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What is your perception of Reformed theology as you start this book?
- What interests you in studying Reformed theology?
- What do you think about the connection of well-known Reformed doctrines with grace and love?
- What are your first thoughts about the connection of Reformed theology to living as the Christian community?