

APPENDIX 5

WHAT IS REFORMED THEOLOGY?



The EFCA has a very strong affirmation of the essentials of the Christian faith, but it also gives congregations some freedom to govern their more specific beliefs. Christ Community Church is an Evangelical Free Church, but one that stands in the Reformed tradition.

What benefits come from being a part of a tradition? Risks?

What benefits come from not being part of a tradition? Risks?

What do you think of when you hear “Reformed theology?” Is it scary? Comforting? Why?

In coming to be a member at CCC you are required to confess your agreement with the EFCA statement of faith. You are *not* required to confess your agreement with Reformed theology. But we do want you to know where the pastors and elders of CCC stand on these issues and we want you to have a clear understanding of what Reformed theology is. We want you to know that though we firmly believe that Reformed theology is Biblical theology, we do not believe it falls under the umbrella of what is essential for all Christians to believe.

Reformed Theology in History

Historically Reformed theology was one tradition that grew up out of the Reformation. Some churches, mainly in France and Switzerland, called themselves Reformed to distinguish their particular beliefs from other traditions – those of the Lutherans, the Anabaptists, the Anglicans, and of course the Catholics. The most famous and influential of “the Reformed”

was John Calvin, so sometimes Reformed Churches are called “Calvinist.” This isn’t really the best name though. Calvin would roll over in his grave if he knew that there were Churches of Christ that named themselves after him – a mere man. And furthermore not all “the Reformed” agree with Calvin on every point.

There are several ways to try to summarize Reformed Theology. You may have heard of the “five points of Calvinism” summed up by the acronym TULIP.¹ The image above is an artist’s depiction of the Synod of Dordt, which took place in 1618-1619 in the city of Dordrecht in the Netherlands. This was the meeting where the five points of Calvinism were first hammered out. It wasn’t that they were new doctrines that had never been taught before, but rather attacks against Reformed theology by Jacob Arminius necessitated a response and defense from Reformed pastors. The five points of Calvinism were written in response to five objections that were raised against Reformed theology. This means that the five points were not originally intended as a comprehensive summary of Reformed doctrine. It is normally not best to define yourself *against* things.

So there is a better word than TULIP to summarize Reformed theology. Jamie Smith says, “In a word, Reformed theology is fundamentally about *grace*.”² At its heart, Reformed theology especially emphasizes the depth of human sin and the grace and sovereignty of God. Sometimes this requires a radical shift of perspective – we tend to be man-centered but Scripture calls us to be God-centered.

“Grace all the way down”

Most people who have been Christians for a while have probably at least heard the famous verses in **Eph. 2:8-9**, if they haven’t memorized them. **Eph. 2:8** says, “*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.*” Most Christians are used to thinking about salvation as a *gift* – something that God freely gives us through faith. Differences come in when we ask to what extent it is a gift. Reformed theology has always said that all of it is a gift, all the way down. Not only is the sacrificial death of Christ for our sins a gift (the *objective* part), but even the grace that enables us to trust Christ is a gift (the *subjective* part). Salvation is the grace of God beginning to end.

“Sin all the way down”

Because of the depth of human sin we need God to act to save us. We cannot save ourselves. **Eph. 2:1** says, “*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.*” “Dead” here doesn’t just mean “not saved” or

¹ TULIP stands for: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints – all doctrines that CCC staff and elders affirm, see the end of this lesson for brief explanations.

² Throughout this lesson we are indebted to James K.A. Smith’s wonderful little book, *Letters to a Young Calvinist* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010) especially pp. 14-27. Much of the wording is his.

going to Hell. It is a vivid metaphor for our total spiritual condition without God. We were corpses. We were goners, who couldn't even lift a finger to help ourselves. Scripture even says that without first receiving grace from God, we cannot even want the gift of salvation that Christ offers (**Rom. 8:7-8; John 6:65**). We have hearts of stone, we need God to give us hearts of flesh (**Ezek. 36:26-29**). **Eph. 2:4-5** says, *"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved."* Notice that God is the one doing the action. It is God who makes us alive.

"God doesn't owe us anything."

In **1 Cor. 4:7**, Paul says, *"What do you have that you did not receive?"* This rhetorical question is meant to evoke the obvious response, "nothing." We have nothing we did not receive. Or to put it the other way – everything is a gift. We owe not only our salvation but also our very existence to a loving God who chose to create us for relationship with him out of the overflow of his love. This becomes all the more amazing when we realize that God doesn't owe us anything. So we realize that grace goes down even further than we thought. He creates and saves and blesses us freely – not because he needed to, or was somehow obligated to, or because we were better than anyone else, but because he loved us. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses repeatedly tells Israel that it was not because of anything special about Israel that God rescued them from slavery in Egypt, *"But it was because the LORD loved you ... that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery"* (**Deut. 7:8**).

"To God alone be the glory"

Therefore everything, creation, redemption, it is all for the glory of God because none of it is our own doing in our own power. Remember **Eph. 2:8-9**, *"it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast."* All of it is God. This is summed up in the famous Reformation motto, *"Soli Deo Gloria,"* to God alone be the glory (**Rom. 11:33-36**). This is why it requires a radical shift in perspective. Even salvation isn't about us. The first question in the Westminster Catechism asks, "What is the chief end of man?" In other words, what is humankind's purpose? The answer says, "To glorify God and enjoy him forever." Most of us walk around with that question and answer flipped upside down in our heads. We ask, "What is the chief end of God?" and answer, "To make me happy and meet all my needs." Reformed theology follows Scripture in demanding that we radically reorient this way of thinking under the lordship of Jesus Christ whom God has made both "Lord and Messiah" (**Acts 2:36**).

God's Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

But before we start thinking that this somehow lets us off the hook or absolves us of our responsibility, we have to remember that the best interpretation of Scripture takes all the data into account. Many people quote **Eph. 2:8-9** and forget to quote the next verse. **Eph. 2:10** says, *"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God*

prepared in advance for us to do.” Even here we see that we are God’s handiwork and that God is planning in advance according to his sovereign will, but we also see that we have responsibility – we have a job to do. Throughout Scripture there is the constant appeal to humankind to respond to God’s love, respond to his grace, to live holy lives, and to believe. We are all accountable for our sins and we must all respond to God in obedience. The Reformed tradition simply teaches that the best way to reconcile God’s sovereignty and human responsibility is to simply try to affirm them both in the way that we see Scripture doing. If we come along and say that our salvation is our own doing, or that God is not sovereign to accomplish his will in the lives of people, then it is incredibly difficult to account for the many passages in Scripture that seem to say otherwise. However if we affirm God’s sovereignty over everything, as Scripture constantly does, then it is often challenging, but not impossible to see how humankind’s responsibility fits in. God has ordained to accomplish his will through our obedience. So it is often impossible to tell where exactly God’s sovereignty ends and human responsibility starts. In reality, they perfectly overlap. From our finite perspective on earth, it is like we can only hear one side of the conversation. But Scripture, inspired by God, tells us both. Although the interaction of God’s sovereignty and our responsibility may often be beyond our comprehension it is always absolutely compatible.

Winsomely Reformed

We are only “Reformed” because we believe it is what Scripture teaches. And though we firmly believe these doctrines, at Christ Community Church we strive to be winsomely Reformed. We have always sought to reflect the biblical balance between God’s sovereign, gracious election of a people for himself and mankind’s legitimate responsibility to choose Christ as Lord and Savior. We do not make these doctrines litmus tests of true faith, nor do we beat away at them week in and week out as if they were the only things Scripture teaches. You will rarely hear them talked about by name from the pulpit, unless a particular passage of Scripture surfaces them. When the teaching at Christ Community Church does touch on topics related to Reformed theology, predestination, election, free will, divine providence and human responsibility, we are especially careful to reflect the biblical balance outlined above and to maintain a gracious, winsome spirit toward those who differ.

An explanation of TULIP:

The doctrines summarized by the acronym TULIP are often called the doctrines of grace, because they are meant to bring out God’s love and mercy toward us. However they are often abused, being taught or understood in a way that has the exact opposite effect. Because Reformed theology is bigger and more comprehensive than these doctrines, we have tried to outline it above without using the language of TULIP, which for many has become loaded, hurtful, and misunderstood. But since these five points are often taught as a summary of Reformed theology and the pastors and elders fully affirm them, they are included below with our

own explanations to hopefully correct some misconceptions and give you a chance to examine them in Scripture for yourself. Remember, they only make sense from a God-centered perspective, and with this orientation they help us “to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge”(Eph. 3:18-19), and cause us to exclaim, “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!” (Rom. 11:33).

Total Depravity – What this means is that every aspect of our being is affected by sin. It does not mean that we are all as bad as we can possibly be. Nor does it mean that we cannot do anything good. What it does mean is that we can’t really do anything that is entirely pure under our own power. Furthermore, this means we can never do anything to make ourselves right with God – we can never be holy enough, or good enough, because everything we do is corrupted deep down. We need God’s grace.

Rom. 8:7-8, “The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.”

Eph. 2:1, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.”

Rom. 3:23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Gen. 6:5, “The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.”

Unconditional Election – Election means choosing. Unconditional election means that God chooses individuals for salvation on the basis of his sovereign grace and not on the basis of any condition he finds or foresees in them. This eternal, unconditional love of God is the ultimate source for our salvation. God chooses to save us not because he had to, or because of anything special about us, or anything good we do, but because he loves us.

This is often the most difficult Reformed doctrine to understand and accept. Remember, God’s calling in no way obliterates our responsibility. From the human viewpoint, salvation is legitimately offered to everyone and is freely given to all who believe, and from God’s viewpoint he saves those whom he has chosen from before the foundations of the world. Both things are true in the pages of Scripture. We also believe that the biblical doctrine of predestination and election, when properly understood, does not in any way diminish the love of God or the free and legitimate offer of the gospel to all, but on the contrary exalts and magnifies God’s love, not only for his elect but for the whole world. Because of the depth of sin, if God did not seek us and draw us toward himself *nobody* would choose him on their own. When the biblical authors teach this doctrine it is always as a comfort and always leads them to magnificent praise.

Acts 13:48, *“When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.”*

John 6:37, *“All that the Father gives to me will come to me; and him who comes to me I will not cast out.”*

John 17:6, *“I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word.”*

John 6:44-45, *“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard the Father and learned from him comes to me.”*

Limited Atonement – We prefer the phrase “particular redemption” because it better describes this doctrine. The atonement (a pacifying sacrifice to pay for sins) Christ achieved on the cross was particularly intended for the salvation of his sheep, his church, his people. Although the sacrifice of Christ was sufficient to pay for the sins of the whole world, its particular application was made only to those people who trust Christ through faith – those people whom he had chosen before the foundations of the world and who would in time come to him in faith and repentance. This is a fine theological point intended to guard against the belief that Christ’s sacrifice could be ineffectual.

Eph. 5:25, *“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”*

John 10:15, *“I lay down my life for the sheep.”*

Rom. 8:32, *“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how shall he not with him freely give us all things?”*

Irresistible Grace – Again, maybe a better term is “effective grace,” since this doctrine teaches that those whom God chooses will be brought to redemption. This doesn’t mean that they will be brought to faith against their will or in spite of their best efforts or something like that, but it does mean that once God starts working on a person he will bring his work to completion. While God showers his common grace on all people, He specifically and effectively calls his chosen people to himself, convicting them of their sin and renewing their rebellious and indifferent hearts to genuine repentance and saving faith by His Holy Spirit.

Acts 16:14, *“The Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul.”*

John 6:65, *“This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted to him by my Father.”*

Rom. 8:30, *“And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”*

1 Cor. 1:23-24, *“but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”*

Perseverance of the Saints – Saints here refers to all believers and all believers will be kept by the power of God to the end. No one who has truly come to faith in Christ and received the Holy Spirit can lose their

salvation or loose the Holy Spirit. No one who has received salvation, new birth, and eternal life can ever be lost. Still this calls for great care on the part of Christians, because whether one has truly been saved is something only God ever knows *for sure*. We should be slow to say that someone “never really was a Christian,” and we should be confident that those who have truly been born again will never loose their salvation even if they “fall away.”

Rom. 8:30, *“And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”*

John 10:27-29, *“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.”*

Phil. 1:6, *“being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”*

1 Cor. 1:8, *“He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*