

# On Being Reformed

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*Doctrinal Basis: "The basis of the BRF shall be the inspired, infallible, inerrant Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as summarized and systematized in the Reformed confessions, specifically the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Standards."*

The **British Reformed Fellowship** has been going through something of a traumatic time. The observant reader will notice that the doctrinal basis has reverted to something closer to our original formulation and that the Editor has changed. It seems then an appropriate time to discuss what we mean by claiming to be **Reformed**? I suggest we profess the following positions.

First, we are **Scriptural**. We hold the writings of the Old and New Testaments to be the supreme authority for our Faith and Practice. There is probably no better statement of the position than that found in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, "Of the Holy Scripture." There, in ten majestic paragraphs, the position is set out such that it can hardly be improved upon.

Second, we are **Catholic**. We hold the Faith as defined in the first four Ecumenical Councils and set out in the Creeds—more particularly those of Nicea and Chalcedon.

Third, we are **Protestant**. The increasing corruption of the Church in the thousand years from Chalcedon led to the Reformation—initially under Martin Luther—but the name itself comes from the Protestation of the Second Diet of Speier (1529).

Fourth, we are **Reformed**. The Church had already split in the eleventh century into **Catholic** and **Orthodox**. Now there was a four-way split in the former. The section which refused reform and indeed has continued and increased its corruption is conveniently known as **Roman Catholic**.



The classic Reformers—Luther, Melancthon, Zwingli, Calvin, Beza, Knox and others less well-known—carried the work forward. But latterly there was a split between Luther on the one hand and Calvin on the other. Initially they differed over the Lord's Supper, and subsequent to the death of Luther, the **Lutherans** moved further away from the Reformed position on sovereign particular grace and election and reprobation, while still retaining the crucial doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Calvin and his associates pursued a position which we would now call **Reformed** or **Presbyterian**.

Finally there was a miscellaneous group which the Reformers labeled **Anabaptist**. They were radical in their thinking and in varying degrees heterodox in doctrine and sometimes in their practice.

Historically the Reformed Churches were the Church of England and Ireland following the *Thirty-Nine Articles* (1553 on). The Reformed Churches following the *Belgic Confession* (1561), *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) and the *Canons of Dordrecht* (1618-19) and sundry other continental churches and confessions. And then the great body of Presbyterian Churches following the *Westminster Standards* of 1646. Congregationalists broadly fall in the Reformed group though differing on independency.

**In summary** then, these churches were **Calvinistic** and **Covenantal** in theology.

William Cunningham has some appropriate remarks about the Reformers. God, having determined reformation, selected as His agents men of strong natural gifts who in His providence were enabled to acquire knowledge and learning, particularly in the area of theology. One thinks of Knox exiled to Geneva undertaking the study of Hebrew in his early thirties. Then they were men of unwearied diligence: pastors, professors, statesmen. One thinks of such a seminal work as Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. But above all, these gifts were subservient to the study and preaching of the Word of God. Calvin's commentaries, for instance, occupy forty-five volumes in addition to his published sermons on Deuteronomy, Galatians, Ephesians, Timothy and Titus, etc.

Reformed Churches were marked by certain characteristics of which, perhaps, the first aspect was doctrinal literacy.



Then there was a strong emphasis on the family. Marriage was normal, honourable and considered inviolable, and children were welcomed into the family, often in large numbers, and were baptized.

Church was important. Ministers were highly educated, took their responsibilities with great seriousness and diligence, and the children were treated as members and instructed in the faith both at home and by regular catechetical classes. Normally individual congregations were seen as part of the wider church.

Since education was important, Christian schools and universities were founded. Not all men are called to be ministers! But all were educated and went out to make their mark in the world. At the highest level we see that in the colonisation of the New World by the Congregationalists and the subsequent foundation of the USA by them, the Scotch-Irish and others. Scottish doctors served our population and Scottish engineers ran our steam ships.

And it is certainly no accident that the most highly favoured nations upon earth are, first, Christian; second Protestant; and third Reformed or Presbyterian. The “gospel leaven” has diffused through all levels of society bringing hard work, honesty, and sobriety. Nor is it an accident that as we have abandoned church and family and education so our societies and nations are starting to fall apart!

The Reformed Faith is no narrow, independent or sectarian system. It is the church of Calvin and Knox; of Rutherford, Gillespie and Witsius; of Bannerman, Buchanan and Cunningham; of the Alexanders, Dabney and the Hodges; of Bavinck and Kuyper; of Warfield, Machen and Hoeksema - and a host of other theological giants in Scotland, England, Switzerland, France, Holland, America, etc. It is the purest exhibition of biblical Christianity—and demands and expects that it continue to be Reformed by the Word of God.

All of which brings us back to the BRF. We are not a church. Our doctrinal basis simply indicates “the system of doctrine” we hold; some of which we have tried to outline in this article. It demarcates our position while leaving plenty of room for discussion amongst ourselves on unresolved issues in Ecclesiology and Eschatology.



Why then is our work important? The widespread apostasy inside Anglicanism in England, Ireland and Wales, and inside Presbyterianism in Scotland, inevitably means that Reformed Churches are thin on the ground. Most other conservative Evangelical Churches—some of which have separated from such apostate denominations—are, or have become, but we are persuaded on no good biblical grounds, baptist. Whether this persuasion goes back to the anabaptists or is home grown we reject their pretensions to being Reformed. We cannot stop people calling their churches “Reformed Baptist”!—but we can point out that the name is an oxymoron.

There is a great work to be done. It will not be done by those of us, including the writer, who by reason of age are inevitably passing off this earthly stage. Nor probably will it be done by our children. But it might be done by theirs, if church and family and school play their part appropriately. Ultimately it will only be done by the Holy Spirit but, as we have seen with the Reformers, He uses vessels appropriately prepared for the task.

If this vision is yours we invite you to join with us by becoming Members or renewing Membership or just subscribing to the *Journal*. We are already planning (DV) our next biennial conference in 2004, hopefully looking at aspects of the family and covenant.

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“It has been claimed that the first word in the Calvinistic system is God; that John Calvin began where Scripture begins: ‘In the beginning God ...’ What does that mean? For John Calvin it meant everything, inasmuch as he viewed everything on earth and in heaven, in this life and the life to come, in its light. Calvin relates everything to God, and specifically to the God whom he discovered in the Scriptures. The central fact of the system called by his name is, therefore, its vision of God.” — *R. A. Finlayson*