

What Does It Mean to Be Reformed?

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Our Reformed Roots

We call ourselves Reformed because New Life Presbyterian Church (NLPC) as well as the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) are rooted in the Protestant Reformation. In the sixteenth century, many believers protested against the false teachings in the church and returned to the true gospel under the leadership of Reformers such as Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin. The term “Reformed” was associated primarily with Calvin’s work in the church of Geneva, but all Protestant Reformers held certain cardinal views in common.

At NLPC and in the PCA, our historical roots extend to the central beliefs that characterized the Protestant Reformation. These commitments can be summarized in three basic doctrines: *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Gratia*, and *Sola Fide*.

Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone) expresses our strong commitment to the unquestionable authority of the Bible. The early Reformers saw many errors in the church of their day. Many of these false teachings stemmed from a denial of Biblical authority. The outlooks of human leaders in the church had risen to a level of authority equal to the Word of God. These human traditions led the church away from truth, and Protestants countered these false views by affirming the unique and supreme authority of the Bible.

At NLPC, we believe it is very important to reaffirm the Bible as the final authority for God’s people. In many circles, the place of Scripture has been usurped by human traditions once again. Modern science, philosophy, and popular opinion have led many to deny the authority of Scripture. In response to these current problems, NLPC affirms with the Reformers that the Bible is the only unquestionable authority. The apostle Paul told Timothy, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). In line with this apostolic witness, we affirm that the original manuscripts of the Bible are the inspired Word of God, without error. They stand as the final judge of truth in all areas of life. We have but one unquestionable rule of faith and life - the Scriptures.

At NLPC our belief in *Sola Scriptura* is put into action. Every sermon, Sunday School lesson, Bible study, or devotional is oriented towards rightly examining and applying Scripture to the modern world. Children as well as adults are taught to take every thought--theological, philosophical, historical, scientific, artistic etc.--captive and make it obedient to Christ under the guidance of Scripture (2 Cor. 10:4). You will never find our pastors, teachers, and leaders questioning the absolute authority of the Bible. Instead, we face the challenges of living for Christ by submitting ourselves absolutely to the Old and New Testaments as our ultimate authority.

Sola Gratia (Grace Alone) declares the Reformers’ belief that the entirety of salvation is God’s gracious gift through Christ. The Reformers encountered the false teaching that human beings could contribute to their own salvation. Believers were taught that they had to add their own merit to the work of Christ in order to receive eternal life. In response to this view, the Reformers insisted that salvation is by grace alone. As the Scripture teaches, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). We are without any hope in ourselves; redemption is a gift freely given by God through grace alone.

In our day, we need to hear this message of grace as never before. Many churches today teach that redemption is a mixture of divine help and human effort. Some churches teach their people a social gospel: deeds of kindness and charity will bring us salvation. Others teach that God’s gracious favor is found through a system of legalism: do this...don’t do that. In one way or another, good moral living becomes a way for us to earn God’s grace and contribute to our own salvation.

NLPC is committed to resisting any idea that diminishes the wonder of God’s grace in salvation. The apostle Paul tells us that the eternal promises of God belong to those who “put no hope in the flesh” (Phil. 3:3). Hence,

we are committed to keeping the Bible's message of grace at the center of our mission. We will not turn away from complete reliance on God in order to put hope in human strength. We look to Christ, and Christ, alone to overcome the ravages of sin in our lives and the world.

At NLPC, we also teach the importance of letting grace saturate our community. We work hard to have a caring, friendly atmosphere which reflects the mercy of God. There isn't one of us who is not in need of a lot of patience and mercy--both human and divine. God stooped low, really low, to scoop us up. He went to immeasurable lengths to give and forgive. How then can we not respond with grace toward the others in our community? Indeed, freely we have received; freely we must give (Mt. 10:8).

At NLPC, we teach that biblical obedience comes as a response to God's grace, not as a prerequisite for receiving it. We are to be motivated by love for God and gratitude for all he has done. We have no greater honor than to submit ourselves fully to the commands of a good God and let Him conform us to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29). At the same time, we avoid all forms of legalism that insist on life habits which go beyond the teachings of Scripture. Instead, we promote Christian liberty and affirm the Dignity of the believer's conscience in applying the incontrovertible truths of Scripture. Here again, we stand with the Reformers and relentlessly affirm that we are saved by *grace alone*.

Sola Fide (Faith Alone) teaches that justification before God is a once and for all event that takes place through faith alone. The early Reformers protested against a church that believed the people's eternal standing before God varied moment by moment. No one could be confident of eternal salvation. Doing good gained the favor of God; doing evil earned His anger. In response, the Protestants reaffirmed the Biblical perspective: "to the man who does not work but trusts God, who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Rom. 4:5). In assuring believers of their unchangeable status with God, Paul goes on to say, "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died--more than that, who was raised to life--is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us" (Rom. 8:33-34). Everyone who trusts in Christ by faith for salvation receives immediate and full forgiveness of all their sins. God's declaration of righteousness is the complete and final verdict for all who have genuine faith in the Savior.

At NLPC, we believe that God's people need to stand firmly on belief in justification by faith alone. All around us people believe their eternal destinies hang in the balance of each day's activities. At NLPC, however, we serve Christ out of the confidence that God has forgiven us of our sins, and credited to our account the righteousness of Christ. When men and women place their faith in Christ, they are set free to serve God with a bold assurance, not out of fear and dread. This confidence in our justification by faith alone then equips us to bring the gospel of Christ to our lost and dying world.

We admire the early Protestant Reformers for what they did; we stand with them as heralds of the Reformed faith. They had the wisdom and courage to formulate biblical truth amid much opposition. Alongside their powerful convictions, however, they also had the humility to state repeatedly, "The Reformed Church is always reforming." Like the Reformers, we face the challenges of our day with conviction and humility. We must always look for new ways to apply the timeless truths of Scripture to our own generation. With an innovative and pioneering spirit we must engage the world of the twenty-first century just as the Reformers engaged the world in the sixteenth century. We believe the best way to give God's people a solid foundation is to help them sink their own roots into the great truths of the Protestant Reformation.

Our Reformed Theology

We also call ourselves Reformed because we affirm the theology that grew out of the Reformation. The contours of this body of doctrine are conveniently outlined in the *Belgic Confession*, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, as well as

in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms*.

NLPC is firmly committed to Reformed Theology. The leadership of NLPC affirms their agreement with the doctrine contained in the *Westminster Confession* and *Catechisms*. This summary of Biblical teachings provides a doctrinal orientation for all our teaching, preaching, and programs.

Reformed Theology includes many items affirmed by all evangelicals. Nevertheless, we also have some distinctive doctrinal emphases. For instance, at the heart of Reformed Theology is belief in divine sovereignty and human dependence. Put simply, we believe the Scriptures teach that God is in complete and absolute control of his creation. We depend on him for all we have and are. These central beliefs are especially important in Reformed outlooks on the plan of salvation.

In the first place, Reformed Theology stresses that God sovereignly accomplished salvation for his people through a single Covenant of Grace extending from one end of the Bible to the other. This covenant relationship between God and his redeemed people unfolded in many stages throughout Biblical history, but these various stages are aspects of one unified Covenant in Christ. Believers before Christ's incarnation looked ahead to salvation coming in Christ. New Testament believers look back at the redemption completed in Christ's death and resurrection. This Covenant of Grace in Christ has always been the only divinely ordained plan for salvation from sin.

In the second place, God also displays his sovereignty and our utter dependence as he applied the Covenant of Grace to individual believers. It often helps to summarize this aspect of Biblical teaching in "The Five Points of Reformed Theology."

The Five Points

1. Total Depravity:

We stress the pervasive corruption of sin. Sin reaches every aspect of human personality and leaves no nook or cranny untainted. The prophet Jeremiah writes, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9) For this reason, all people are spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1) and unable, apart from the inward stirrings of the Holy Spirit, to respond in faith to the offer of the gospel. We must depend on a sovereign act of God to break the grip of sin.

2. Unconditional Election:

We believe that the eternal, unconditional love of God for us is the ultimate basis of our salvation. Believers do not establish their own redemption; they utterly depend on God's sovereign, everlasting love in Christ as the ground of their salvation. As Paul wrote, "It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy" (Rom. 9:16).

3. Particular Redemption:

We emphasize that Christ's atoning death did not simply make salvation possible. Rather, his sacrifice on the cross completely accomplished the salvation of believers. Christ died for "his sheep" (John 10:11, 15), "his Church" (Acts 20:28), and "his people" (Mt. 1:21) to give them eternal life. God sovereignly ordained Christ's death as the full payment for our sins. Thus, it fully satisfied the judgment of God for those who believe.

4. Irresistible Grace:

We recognize that salvation comes to sinful people because the Holy Spirit sovereignly changes their rebellious hearts. He gives them the spiritual ears with which to hear the call of God. The sheep hear the voice of Christ, are known by him, and follow him (John 10:27). We depend on his powerful grace to transform us into new creations and to draw us to our Saviour.

5. Perseverance of the Saints:

We stress that God's power will keep true believers in Christ to the end. While we recognize our responsibility to "work out our salvation" with great seriousness (Phil. 2:12), we also affirm that it is God who is at work within us both "to will and to do his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). Thus, we persevere in faith with the assurance of eternal life because God sovereignly works all for our good (Rom. 8:28); that is, our salvation.

Our Reformed Hope

We also call ourselves Reformed because of our hope for the future. All believers look forward to that great day when Jesus will return in glory. We share this vision with all of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Yet, throughout the centuries the Reformed branch of the church has sought ways to bring the gospel to all areas of life.

Our Reformed Hope motivates us to expand the Kingdom in two ways. First, NLPC purposes to instill in men and women the vision to bring and send the gospel to all people in every part of the world. As a congregation we want to be involved in cross-cultural ministries and in every segment of American society. At the same time, we want consistently to hold forth the challenge for Christians to consider the call for foreign missions. We are told that Christ purchased people for God "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9). Therefore, the proclamation of the gospel to all people is one of the chief aims of NLPC.

Second, our Reformed Hope looks beyond preaching and the building of the church. We believe that the Lordship of Christ extends to all areas of life. Christ is Lord not only of the church; he is supreme over the family, the arts and sciences, and human society at large. For this reason, we do not withdraw from the world. Rather, we determine to bring the Word of God to bear on every dimension of human culture. As the gospel spreads, believers are to transform their cultures to the honor and glory of God. We are the bearers of God's image. We are to fill the earth, every aspect of the earth, with the knowledge of God our creator and redeemer, and thus fulfill the mandate given to Adam and Eve so long ago (Gen. 1:27-28).

Why do we call ourselves Reformed? We have touched on the basic commitments that underlie this name. Now we hope you will learn more about our Reformed Roots, Theology, and Hope. They have much to offer to all Christians as they prepare to serve Christ and his church.

(This article has been adapted from "What Is Reformed About Reformed Theological Seminary" written by Dr. Richard Pratt, professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary)