



# Thoughts from the Bible and Books

4930 S. Hagadorn Rd., E. Lansing, MI 48823 - 517.351.6810

September 2007

## The “R” in URC

The “R” in URC stands for Reformed–University *Reformed* Church. University makes sense given our location. Church is obvious. But what does Reformed mean?

Let me start by telling you what it does not mean. The “R” in URC does not mean that everyone at the church comes from a Reformed background. Very many do not. Even fewer come specifically out of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), our denomination. We have members who come from non-denominational, Baptist, Lutheran, Catholic, and Methodist backgrounds (to name but a few), and those from no church background whatsoever.

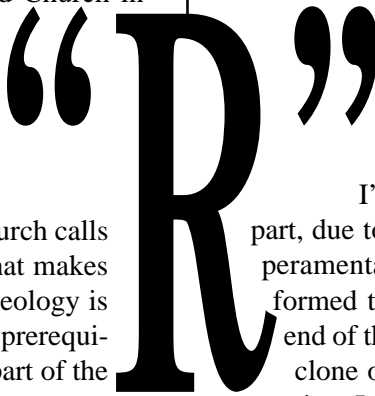
The “R” doesn’t mean that everyone at the church calls himself Reformed or even knows for sure what makes our church a Reformed church. Reformed theology is not a requirement of membership, nor is it a prerequisite for being a valuable, welcomed, serving part of the church.

But none of this is to suggest that being a Reformed church is basically meaningless. It is always tricky to know how much to emphasize your doctrinal distinctives and confessional heritage. On the one hand, I want this church to be open to all kinds of Christians and those curious about Christianity, and I want us as Christians to be gracious toward other Christian traditions, gladly affirming what we can affirm together. On the other hand, I’m thankful and humbly proud to pastor URC not simply UC.

An analogy may be helpful. I don’t think of Reformed theology as a separate tree from Baptists, Lutherans, and Methodists. Provided that each tradition has stayed anchored to its historic, orthodox roots, we are all part of the same tree marked Christianity. I don’t think for a second that Reformed churches are the only good churches, let alone the only Christian churches.

Reformed is not a different tree altogether, but neither do I think of Reformed as simply a branch on the tree of Chris-

tianity. The branch metaphor is often used, but it makes it sound like none of the theological traditions is more right than another. We are all just branches—you have your tradition, I have mine, but in the end we are all out an a theological limb anyway. I think of Reformed theology not as separate tree, nor as one among many branches to choose from, but—and here’s where my metaphor may rub some people the wrong way—as Christianity in full bloom. That is to say, I don’t think of Reformed as a subspecies of Christianity but as the richest, deepest, truest (but not perfect) expression of Christianity. I would expect a committed Baptist or Lutheran to say the same thing about her tradition.



I’m sure I embrace Reformed theology, in part, due to a host of familial, sociological, and temperamental factors. But at bottom I embrace Reformed theology because I think it is true. At the end of the day I am not interested in being a Calvin clone or towing the line of some historical tradition, I want to believe what is most biblical, most honoring to Christ, most edifying, and most God glorifying. On my worst days I am Reformed just to prove a point. On my best days I am Reformed out of deep love for Jesus and allegiance to the Word of God.

So what does “Reformed” mean anyway? Let me answer that question by talking history, polity, and theology.

**History.** Reformed churches trace their roots back to John Calvin (1509-1564). Calvin was a French Reformer who labored primarily in Geneva, Switzerland, and whose influence was felt throughout the European continent and the British Isles. Where Calvinism took root in Britain and Scotland, the churches were called Presbyterian. Where Calvinism took root on the continent, the churches were called Reformed. URC is part of a denomination that comes out of the reformed churches in the Netherlands.

Continued on back side...

The word “Reformed,” then, has to do with the Reformation. If someone asks you, as they have asked me, “what are you reformed from?” You could say, “We come out of the Protestant Reformation, so I suppose we are reformed from the Catholic church” (which I said to my dental hygienist, who then promptly informed me that she was Catholic!) A more helpful, and equally correct answer would be: “We are called Reformed because we want to be constantly reformed according to the Word of God.”

URC is a confessional church. This means that our theology is shaped and defined by certain confessions. We hold to ecumenical creeds like the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. Christian churches of all kinds have held to these creeds for over a millennium, which is what makes them ecumenical. In addition to these ancient creeds and our own URC Statement of Faith, as a Reformed church we subscribe to three other confessions: the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Belgic Confession (1561), and the Canons of Dort (1618-19). These three confessions, sometimes called the Three Forms of Unity, are very similar in theology to the Presbyterian confessions of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Westminster Confession of Faith, Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms). The RCA does not require members or office holders to subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity. But as an RCA pastor I am bound to uphold their theology, and as an RCA church our preaching and worship is to be in accord with this confessional heritage. In other words, you don’t have to be Reformed to be here, but, if I can state the obvious, being here means being in a Reformed church.

**Polity.** How a church is structured and governed is called its polity. Reformed churches have presbyterian polity. *Prebyteros* is the Greek word for elder. So presbyterian polity means we believe in elder rule. In congregational polity (e.g., Baptists, free churches), the congregation is the final authority. In episcopalian polity (e.g., Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists), the bishop has the final authority. In many non-denominational churches, the senior pastor is the final authority. In presbyterian polity, the board of elders has the final authority. This doesn’t mean the elders make all the decisions, especially in the RCA where the consistory (elders and deacons) have governing authority too. Elder rule means that the elders exercise church discipline, maintain doctrinal fidelity in the church’s teaching and preaching, and shepherd the flock of God (1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Peter 5:1-2).

**Theology.** In a lot of ways, Reformed theology is no different from any other orthodox Christian theology. Reformed theology affirms the Trinity, the deity of Christ,

the resurrection, the atoning death of Christ on the cross, justification by faith alone, the sanctification of sinners, the necessity of new birth by the Holy Spirit, the second coming of Jesus, and the inspiration of Scripture (“an infallible rule” and “perfect and complete in all respects” according to the Belgic Confession).

But Reformed theology also has distinctive beliefs, some of which are shared by other confessional traditions. Reformed theology emphasizes God’s sovereignty—the belief that all things, no matter how trivial or perplexing, come to us according to God’s plan. Clearly, God is not the author of sin, but even wicked deeds fall under the sovereignty of God. He not only uses evil acts for his good purposes, he plans them ahead of time and directs them for his glory (Gen. 50:20; Acts 4:27-28). Nothing happens by accident. God knows all things and providentially oversees and ordains all things (Eph. 1:11).

God is also sovereign over our salvation. The decisive factor in our salvation is God. Why some believe and some do not is ultimately owing to God’s sovereignty. True, we are called to repent and believe, but even these are a gift from God. God’s sovereignty over salvation is sometimes described with acronym TULIP, which has its origins in the Canons of Dort. “T” stands for total depravity—we are spiritually dead and incapable of turning to God apart from the work of his Spirit “U” stands for unconditional election—God chose us in eternity past, not because he saw that we would believe, but in order that we would believe. “L” stands for limited atonement—Jesus’ death was sufficient for the whole world, but his substitutionary sacrifice atoned for the elect alone. “I” stands for irresistible grace—we cannot thwart the Spirit’s efforts to regenerate our hearts. “P” stands for perseverance of the saints—God will see to it that his chosen ones keep the faith and are preserved and sanctified to the very end.

Of course there are other beliefs that make up Reformed theology. I could mention the emphasis on the covenant of grace as a framework for understanding Scripture. I could mention the belief in the real, spiritual (but not physical) presence of Christ at the Lord’s Supper and the practice of baptizing believers and their children. I could mention the important place the law (especially the Ten Commandments) plays in Reformed theology. But in a word, Reformed theology means sovereignty. Which, in another word, means grace—God’s grace in choosing us, God’s grace in giving us faith, God’s grace in sending Jesus to die for us, God’s grace in keeping us, God’s grace in ordering every detail of our lives for our good. That’s Reformed theology. And that’s why I love the “R” in URC.