

Entering the Wonderful Story

*While they were standing thus a great horn, wonderfully loud and sweet, blew from somewhere inside that walled garden and the gates swung open... "Welcome, in the Lion's name. Come further up and further in."
(C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*)*

Introduction & Testimony

- Like many of you, my parents did not come from a Reformed & Presbyterian background. When the OPC planted a church in my hometown in the late 1970s, it was the first Bible-believing Reformed church in a generation. When my folks left independent Baptist churches and began attending the OPC, some of their friends feared they had joined a cult. They were even asked: "Do you still pray?"
- Because the Reformed faith was new to our community, most of the adults in our new church were first-generation Presbyterians – we were all learning as we went, from the foundations up.
- This class is for people like us:
 - Those of us who are new to what we commonly call "the Reformed faith."
 - Those of us who maybe are not so new, but desire to clarify/refresh from the ground up.

Objectives

- Explain the Reformed faith with clarity, charity, and humility – and without 'Christianese.'
- Cultivate an appreciation for the unmatched richness of the Reformed understanding of faith and life.
- ***In short: to go "further up and further in" to the living goodness of God's wonderful grace:***

The prophets and apostles, and the saints generally who appear before us in the Old and New Testament and later in the church of Christ, did not sit and philosophize about God in abstracted concepts, but rather confessed what God meant to them and what they owed to Him in all the circumstances of life. God was for them not at all a cold concept, which they then proceeded rationally to analyze, but He was a living, personal force, a reality infinitely more real than the world around them.¹

Definition and Goal

- So what is "the Reformed faith"?

The Reformed faith is all of life lived according to the Word of God, by the grace of God, through faith in the Son of God, united by the Spirit of God, to magnify and enjoy God.

- all of life lived... (Rom. 14:7-8, 1 Cor. 10:31, Col. 3:17)
- according to the Word of God (Ps. 19:7-11, 2 Tim. 3:16-17)
- by the grace of God (Rom. 12:6, Eph. 4:7)
- through faith in the Son of God (Gal. 2:20, Eph. 2:8-9)
- united by the Spirit of God (Jn. 15:4-5, Rom. 6:5, Eph. 4:4-6)
- to magnify and enjoy God (Rom. 11:36, Eph. 3:20-21, 1 Tim. 4:4-5)

This is the God-centered life – to live consciously, every day, trusting that all of life and history is the unfolding of God's good story under God's total, wise control. (Ps. 139:16)

- What is the goal of the Reformed faith?
 - Correct thinking – about God, man, life, the universe, and everything. (*orthodoxy*)
 - Correct feeling – a right spirit toward God, people, life, etc. (*orthopathos*)
 - Correct practice – God-honoring & neighbor-loving behavior in all areas of life (*orthopraxy*)

¹ Herman Bavinck, *The Wonderful Works of God*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2019), 9.

The Sovereignty of God ('Calvinism')

- The core idea of the Reformed faith is **the sovereignty of God – God rules and controls all things!**
 - in creation: "...in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them." (Ps. 139:16)
 - in salvation: "...even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world..." (Eph. 1:4)
 - in history: "...having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will..." (Eph. 1:11)
 - in human freedom: "...this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed..." (Acts 2:23)
 - in the 'random': "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD." (Prov. 16:33)
- This idea is simple, profound, *and* challenging:
 - Simple: if God is God, how could he *not* be calling all the shots?
 - Profound: if God is calling all the shots, then *nothing* is truly random... wow!
 - Challenging: if God is sovereign over the whole story, what is human freedom?
if God is sovereign over the whole story, why do bad things happen?
... *and many other hard questions!*
- Why is this called 'Calvinism'?
 - These core truths of God's sovereignty were rediscovered during the Protestant Reformation, and articulated especially by John Calvin (1509-1564) in his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.
 - However, Calvin would have *hated* this label – he made sure he was buried in an unmarked grave!

The Controversy

- This biblical teaching on God's sovereignty has been a cause for much controversy. Why?
 - Conceit ("cage stage Calvinists")
 - Ignorance ("You don't believe in free will," "This makes people into robots,")
 - Pride ("If Calvinism is true, then I don't want to be a Christian!")
- Given the controversy and divisiveness, why is it still important to embrace/celebrate this teaching?
 - However many hard questions it raises, it is clearly what the Bible teaches.
 - Because it is biblical, embracing it will enrich our faith:
 - "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." (Jn. 4:24)
 - "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." (1 Tim. 1:5) – *how can we have a 'sincere' faith unless we sincerely, truly know God?*
 - When God's sovereignty is truly felt, it will melt our pride and magnify God's goodness!

Characteristics of a Reformed Church

- Biblical – We are committed to the Bible – all of it, even the parts that are unpopular or that make us uncomfortable. We aren't afraid of the hard questions this creates, because we don't believe that the Bible is just another book. Though it is written in human language, we believe that the Bible is the Word of God. And if God is who the Bible says he is, then nothing in the Bible is too hard for him. He can intervene in history. He can enter history. He can even raise the dead. Our place is not to judge the Bible, but to believe it fully, interpret it correctly, and apply it faithfully to our hearts and lives. Even when we don't fully understand the Bible, the Bible is the only book that fully understands, explains, and directs us – without error.

- Confessional – Every church has some understanding of what the Bible teaches. The only question is whether they make it official by putting it in writing. We insist on being transparent about what we believe, and so we publish our understanding of the Bible in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms*.
- Covenantal – We believe that the key to connecting the dots in God’s story, from the Old Testament into the New, is the biblical idea of ‘covenant’ – a relationship that God establishes with families, through representatives, and guarantees by his promises. God made the first covenant with Adam, for himself and all his natural offspring. He made the second covenant with Christ, for himself and all his spiritual offspring.
- Generational – Because we believe God works covenantally through families, we emphasize that the gospel promises belong not just to believing adults, but also to our children. Thus we baptize our children, raise them as disciples, teach them to pray and believe the gospel promises, and welcome them into the church’s worship, work, and witness.
- Connectional – We believe we are only a small part of Christ’s body, the church – which is like a vast tree spread across culture, race, time, and space. We express this unity with the global and historical church partly through our *theological confessions* (which distill sixteen centuries of the church’s biblical understanding), and partly through our *governmental organization*. Our local church is accountable to other local churches in our region. Our regional church is accountable to other regional churches in our denomination. Our denomination is accountable to other Reformed denominations in North America and around the world.
- Contextual – We believe that our Christian faith should influence everything we do. Therefore we seek to live, learn, and labor as Christians in every area (‘context’) of life.
- Missional – We take the Great Commission seriously, and so are committed to sacrificial church-planting and disciple-making, both in our own culture (home missions) and cross-culturally (foreign missions).
- Worshipful – We believe that the purpose of all of the above is to magnify and enjoy the goodness, love, and wonder of God. For this reason we are very intentional about worship, spelling out each step in the order of worship (‘liturgy’) carefully and deliberately. Our worship services often present newcomers with a steep “learning curve,” but their complexity is not “tradition for tradition’s sake.” Rather, liturgy is for the sake of worshipping God with excellence, good order, joy, and reverence.

“Further up and further in!”

In the coming weeks, we will attempt to unpack the characteristics listed above as follows...

- God’s sovereignty in our history. Where did the Reformed faith come from? Why does it matter?
- God’s sovereignty in salvation. What are the “five solas” of the Reformation? What are the covenants? What is justification, sanctification, and union with Christ?
- God’s sovereignty in worship. Why do we worship God the way that we do? How do we know how God wants to be worshipped?
- God’s sovereignty in the church. How does ‘Presbyterianism’ work? What is the *Book of Church Order*?
- God’s sovereignty at home. How do I commune with God privately? With my family?
- God’s sovereignty at work. How do I follow Jesus as a boss, employee, or student?
- God’s sovereignty in the culture. How do I follow Jesus as a citizen?