

A GENERAL DESCRIPTION

“Reformed” originally referred to those within the Catholic Church who appealed to the authority of Scripture in order to rid the church of medieval abuses in doctrine and life.

Those who wanted a reformed (Catholic) church agreed with the historic Christian faith of the ancient creeds but recorded points of disagreement with the medieval church in what are now called the Reformed Confessions. Common to these various confessions was the emphasis on the sovereignty of God and hence the obedience of redeemed people to His will.

From the emphasis on obedience to God developed a total world- and life-view, relevant not only for reforming the church but also for reforming social relationships and theoretical thought.


“Reformed,” therefore, included not only a movement in the Reformation, followed by certain confessional churches, but also under the name *Calvinism* included a major social force in Western civilization, taking its place in the successive historical appearances of Greco-Roman paganism, Islam, and medieval Roman Catholicism. Differences with the other worldviews become clear in the following areas . . .

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE REFORMED TRADITION

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GOD

God is not reduced to the world, isolated from the world, nor mediated to the world as a whole through a special part of the world. Instead, God has fellowship with His creatures through Jesus Christ.

MANKIND

There is no elite caste of those who reflect the so-called higher God-like characteristics, nor are there individuals who may lord it over their fellows. Instead, those with God-given talents and gifts use them to serve others.

THE WORLD

The world is not so revered that it is feared, so devalued that it is ignored, nor is it divided into two separate realms or kingdoms, one for nature and the other for grace. Instead, the world is created, fallen, but anticipating redemption through Jesus Christ.

RELIGION

(1) For the Reformed, religion is redemptive. The so-called “normal” religious inclination of human beings is really “abnormal” because of sin and has required the redemptive intervention of God through the work of Jesus Christ.

(2) For the Reformed, religion does not exist primarily to meet the needs of men and women. The basic human responsibility is to glorify God in all things.

(3) For the Reformed, religion is a direct relationship between the individual and God through the mediation of Jesus Christ alone. There is no need for mediation through religious specialists or hierarchies.

(4) If God is to be glorified in all things, and individuals are directly related to Him in Christ, then religion is the creature’s responsibility in every area of life not merely isolated parts of life. This contradicts the post-Enlightenment assumption that religion is limited to a particular area such as ethics or feelings, thus turning religion over to the specialists—the ethical or sensitive elite.

POLITICS

(1) During the Reformation, the state was asked to enforce social righteousness and even to correct abuses in supposedly false forms of worship. While the Reformed saw the social ramifications of their belief and conduct, they admittedly mingled church and state.

(2) Such intervention by the state in church affairs was a practice borrowed from the Middle Ages (dating, in fact, from Constantine) and was simply assumed to be correct in the 16th century. For this reason, most churches in the Reformation days tended toward theocratic formulas.

(3) However, the Reformed later broke with this practice of State intervention because their teaching on the church distinguished between the church-visible and the church-invisible. The medieval theocratic heritage had identified the visible, institutional church with the true church so the state could see the “true” and enforce its claims. The Reformed were forced to clarify that the state lacked the ability to discern what only God knew, so liberty should be granted to all churches.

(4) The Reformed continued to follow the biblical warrant of demanding from the civil magistrate the public enactment of God’s justice as the magistrate discerned that justice in his own conscience before God.

(5) Thus, the state was seen as a separate “sphere” of authority from that of the church but still answerable to the Lord of all things who had revealed His will in the Scripture.

THEORETICAL THOUGHT

(1) By “theoretical thought” is meant our theory formation in what are usually distinguished as the sciences and the humanities.

(2) The Reformed have not seen the crucial issue as faith vs. science since all of life is religion, yielding to God either obedience or disobedience.

(3) The central issue has instead been seen as a tension between two different approaches to theoretical thought.

(a) The assumption prior to the 18th century, and still maintained by the Reformed, is that the world is presently “abnormal.” Therefore, man and the world can only properly be understood as created by God, fallen into sin, but intended for redemption in Jesus Christ. From the Bible come the presuppositions with which we can rightly explore the structure of created reality.

(b) The assumption of post-18th-century thought is that the world is “normal” and can only be understood as a self-contained cause and effect process even though this leaves no room for human values and freedom.

(4) These two approaches to the world reflect two different kinds of consciousness: those who know the abnormality of things, requiring redemption through Jesus Christ, and those who do not know.

BIBLICAL STUDIES

(1) The Reformed confessions do not dictate to the Bible what it must say. Instead, they indicate that God’s authoritative, written revelation can be summarized and communicated.

(2) Jesus Christ is understood as the fulfillment of the covenants of redemptive history. For this reason the apostle Paul used Adam, Abraham, Moses, and David to show how Christ has taken covenant curse upon Himself in order to bring covenant blessing to those who believe.

(3) Jesus Christ fulfills God’s purposes for His creation. Even without the entrance of sin into the world, man was to become more than he was—as represented by the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. Since the fall into sin, however, the resurrection of Christ began the new order of existence to which we are heirs through the life-giving Spirit by faith.

—Notes based on the Stone Foundation Lectures by Abraham Kuyper, Princeton, N.J., 1898. For more information see Kuyper, Abraham, Lectures on Calvinism, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931.