
THE REFORMED FAITH – WHAT IS IT?

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What does it mean to be called ‘Reformed’? We could answer historically and explain that the word refers to the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. That astounding rediscovery of scriptural truth was spearheaded by reformers such as John Calvin and was enshrined in profound, comprehensive confessions of the church such as the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Canons of Dort and Westminster Confession of Faith. Reformed Christians are the spiritual descendants of that era.

Or we could approach the question theologically. The Reformed faith, often known as Calvinism, emphasises such doctrines as the sovereignty of God, predestination, the helpless fallenness of human beings and the irresistible and triumphant working of God’s grace. To hold ‘the Reformed faith’ is to believe these and other related doctrines.

But such answers, accurate though they are, do not go far enough. They do not express the beauty or the wonder. They do not thrill us, or make us want to shout and to sing for gladness. They do not appear to offer anything radically different to the growing numbers of young people, tired of ‘Christianity-lite’, who are hungry for something more authentic and substantial. They could be misunderstood as suggesting that the Reformed faith is merely one among several Christian ‘traditions’ or ‘emphases’ – attractive to certain types and personalities, of little relevance for others.

This would be to miss the glory of what the Reformed faith really is. For it is more than standing in a historical tradition. It begins, certainly, with the conviction that certain doctrines are true, but it goes far beyond that. It is something supernatural, a reality which cannot be produced by human means but which comes down from heaven. It is a transforming, energising experience, the direct result of the work of the Holy Spirit of God.

One of its clearest descriptions is found in chapter 6 of Isaiah, where God appears to the prophet as he worships in the temple. In Isaiah’s experience we can identify four elements which make up the spiritual

reality we call the 'Reformed faith'. It involves seeing, feeling, receiving and doing – or, *vision, conviction, reception* and *consecration*.

A VISION OF GOD

'I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up' (verse 1). It was a bleak, discouraging time – the middle of the 8th century BC, 'the year that King Uzziah died' (verse 1). The passing of the leper-king symbolized the end of Judah's political influence and commercial prosperity, the fading of her national glory. But, in that period of disillusionment, Isaiah's eyes were lifted to a higher king.

That king was 'the Lord' – Adonai – the sovereign One, the God who is able to carry out all his purposes. And he was 'sitting upon a throne' – serenely exercising his prerogatives as King and Judge. As such, he was 'high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple'. The sinless angels who surrounded him veiled their faces before his brightness, and one called to another in echoing praise of his holiness and glory.

It was an awesome, unforgettable sight, stamped indelibly on Isaiah's consciousness. One of his favourite ways of referring to God is 'the Holy One of Israel' – an expression used six times in the rest of the Bible, but twenty-six times in this prophecy. From this moment and for ever after a refrain was beating in his brain, burning in his heart, over and over again – 'My eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!' (verse 5).

There is no better definition of a Reformed Christian. He or she is someone who has 'seen the King', Almighty God, who is not limited or frustrated, disappointed or weak. He loves the God who is sovereign, infinitely holy and glorious – who calls forth adoring worship from those to whom he has revealed himself. Reformed Christians worship a great God. Their view of him is lofty, magnificent, transforming. We are not curious historical fossils, left over from an almost-forgotten past. We are not a pathetic minority trying to carve out for ourselves a distinct identity – but we are God-possessed, God-admiring men, women and churches to whom it has been given to see the King in his glory.

And this, more than anything, is what people need today. A. W. Tozer's words of a generation ago are more applicable now than ever:

The Church has surrendered her once lofty concept of God and has substituted for it one so low, so ignoble, as to be utterly unworthy of

thinking, worshipping men . . . The low view of God entertained almost universally among Christians is the cause of a hundred lesser evils everywhere among us . . . The heaviest obligation lying upon the Christian Church today is to purify and elevate her concept of God until it is once more worthy of Him – and of her (*The Knowledge of the Holy*, pp. 6,12).

But there was a more painful aspect to Isaiah's experience.

CONVICTION OF SIN

His initial reaction to the vision of God is not one of joy. Still less does he congratulate himself on having gained a more accurate theological understanding than his contemporaries, on now being 'truly Reformed'. 'Woe is me!' is his response – a piercing cry of self-condemnation. 'I am lost', he is saying – literally 'I have been made to cease, I am doomed to die.' God's holiness is profoundly threatening. He sees the worshipping seraphim and realizes that he, like they, should praise this glorious Being, but 'I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips' (verse 5). Convicted of unworthiness, Isaiah sustains the blinding shock of a personal encounter with One whom he is utterly unfit to meet. Self-confidence vanishes in the flame of God's holiness. Like Job (*Job* 42:5, 6) and John (*Rev.*1:17), the vision of God overwhelms him and throws him into an agony of self-condemnation.

People who have seen God – really seen him – can never again be self-satisfied or self-important. His greatness overshadows our littleness, his purity makes pitifully obvious our moral guilt. So the Reformed faith produces men and women who are lowly and meek. They do not posture or swagger, they do not boast about their doctrinal expertise or fancied abilities. Any who do are ignorant of the ABCs of the faith they profess. Instead, they 'do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with their God' (*Mic.* 6:8). For them, the fact that 'no mere man since the fall is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but doth daily break them in thought, word and deed' (*Shorter Catechism*, Q. and A. 82) is no mere dogmatic formality but a painful burden.

Stephen Charnock has put it memorably:

A sense of this (God's holiness) will render us humble in the possession of the greatest holiness a creature were capable of. We are apt to be proud,

with the Pharisee, when we look upon others wallowing in the mire of base and unnatural lusts; but let any clap their wings, if they can, in a vain boasting and exaltation, when they view the holiness of God. What torch, if it had reason, would be proud and swagger in its own light, if it compared itself with the sun? . . . This self-emptiness at the consideration of Divine purity is the note of the true church and of a true member of the church; whereas boasting of perfection and merit is the property of the anti-christian tribe, that have mean thoughts of this adorable perfection (*The Existence and Attributes of God*, vol. 2, p. 192).

Far from being seen as a pattern to follow, Isaiah might, in some contemporary churches, be advised to see a counsellor for repairs to his damaged self-image. But this clear-eyed evaluation of who and what we are by nature brings a refreshing breath of sanity into our era of appallingly irreverent worship, evangelism which makes little mention of sin, carelessness about obedience to God's law and a nauseating man-centredness.

Yet biblical Christianity never leaves a convicted sinner in the depths, for we see this broken man being brought to transforming joy.

RECEPTION OF GRACE

What can guilty Isaiah do? Make himself clean in God's sight? Never! But God can make him clean – and does. For, as he lies in his despair, an angel comes from the Lord's presence with a burning coal from the incense altar, a symbol of forgiveness. He applies it to the 'unclean lips', where all the guilt is gathered. As it touches, it cleanses.

How can that be? 'Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for' (verse 7). A sacrifice of propitiation is in view – offered somehow, somewhere – quite apart from the sinner's knowledge or acting, and on that basis he is pronounced forgiven. Isaiah has done nothing – God has done everything. It is a pointer to Christ and his atonement, as the apostle John was later to discern: 'Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him' (*John* 12:41).

At the heart of the Reformed faith is the liberating persuasion that it is God alone who saves sinners. The so-called 'five points of Calvinism' – unconditional election, irresistible grace, and so on – are simply the outworking and explanation of that reality. It all makes perfect sense, with

a compelling coherence and logic. For when we stand in Isaiah's place, when we too see the holy God and are convicted of total personal depravity, it is quite apparent that salvation must be the work of God from first to last. Any other view is unthinkable.

The Reformed faith, in other words, far from being a fatalistic distortion, is the distilled essence of the biblical gospel. To put it in the words of C. H. Spurgeon:

If anyone should ask me what I mean by a Calvinist, I should reply, He is one who says '*Salvation is of the Lord*'. I cannot find in Scripture any other doctrine than this' (*The Early Years*, p.168).¹

B. B. Warfield sums up our journey so far:

The fundamental principle of Calvinism . . . lies in a profound apprehension of God in His majesty, with the inevitably accompanying poignant realization of the exact nature of the relation sustained to Him by the sinful creature . . . when the sinful soul rests in humble, self-emptying trust purely on the God of grace ('Calvinism', Works, V: pp. 354-55).

CONSECRATION OF LIFE

The prophet has been captured by the vision of God, broken by conviction of sin, delivered by the gift of grace - but the account doesn't stop there. To this man comes a haunting, challenging question: 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' (verse 8). God is looking for messengers, for people to serve him in the world.

'Here am I! Send me' (verse 8), replies Isaiah. It is a joyous response. He doesn't regard service as a sacrifice or a burden. He doesn't consider that he is doing God a favour by agreeing to be his messenger. On the contrary, he can hardly believe that such a privilege is being offered to him. One moment a convicted criminal, the next an ambassador of the Almighty! That the great God chooses to use him creates not a sinking feeling of obligation but a delighted shout of praise.

His commitment is also unconditional. God hasn't yet explained where he intends to send him or what he will be expected to do. But none of this

¹ *The Early Years*, the Autobiography of C. H. Spurgeon, vol. 1 (Banner of Truth, 1962), p.168

matters to the forgiven sinner. 'Here am I! Send me' – anywhere! – for anything! He expresses no reservations, puts forward no conditions, but gives himself unhesitatingly into his Master's hand.

The Reformed faith is essentially active and dynamic. It does and dares, dreams and suffers and achieves. Calvinism has produced great evangelists and missionaries. It has transformed nations and cultures and influenced profoundly the history of continents. It has sent believers out into every sphere of life, seeking to bring all under the rule of King Jesus. It renders its adherents bold, patient, industrious, and fearless. When the Reformed believer prays 'Your will be done on earth' (*Matt. 6:10*), he is making a commitment as well as a plea. Such a faith alone has the breadth and depth to turn our self-worshipping society from melt-down.

'Who will go for us?' is the Lord's question to the church at the beginning of the 21st century. The task is daunting, the opportunities unparalleled, the rewards limitless. We need a generation of young Christian men and women who will prove themselves descendants of John Bunyan's valiant man. The door of the palace was guarded by many men in armour, placed there to hinder pilgrims from entering. But at last,

when every man started back for fear of the armed men, Christian saw a man of a very stout countenance come up to the man that sat there to write, saying 'Set down my name, Sir'; the which when he had done, he saw the man draw his sword, and put an helmet upon his head, and rush toward the door upon the armed men, who laid upon him with deadly force. But the man, not at all discouraged, fell to cutting and hacking most fiercely. So after he had received and given many wounds to those that attempted to keep him out, he cut his way through them all, and pressed forward into the palace.¹

'Set down my name, Sir'. The Reformed faith is the experience of sinners, lost and helpless before a holy God, who receive his saving grace in Christ and offer themselves to him thenceforth in glad service. At its best and truest it is vibrant with worship, gratitude and high endeavour. John Calvin's life-motto, 'My heart I offer to you, Lord Jesus, eagerly and sincerely', was perhaps his version of the response of Isaiah, the only one appropriate for every child of God: 'Here am I! Send me.'

¹ This is one of the lessons taught to Christian in the house of the Interpreter. In the Banner of Truth edition of *The Pilgrim's Progress* it is on pp. 30–1.