

Reformed Theology Broadly Defined

Who owns the right to define what is and is not truly “reformed theology”? As it is not a registered trademark or copyrighted name, the government is no help. It is a linguistic term, and as with all language, subject to various definitions by groups or individuals.

This aspect of language is the reason philosophers spend so much time defining their terms before using them. So how do we define “reformed theology”?

The National Covenant Presbyterian Church would define “reformed theology” very broadly. Not a five point system, or a three point system, or any system, but as an approach rather than a set of beliefs.

A seminary professor once described reformed theology in this way. He said, “There is a Lutheran way of cleaning out a desk drawer, and a Reformed way of cleaning out a desk drawer. The Lutheran opens the drawer and see some things there that don’t belong. These he removes. He sees some things there that are missing, and so retrieving these, he puts them in their place. And he sees some things that are out of place and he puts them in their proper place; satisfied, the closes the drawer. This is essentially what Luther did with the Roman Catholic theology. Some things needed to go; some things needed to be added; some things needed to be rearranged, but he left many things in place.”

He continued, “Now when a Reformed person cleans out a desk drawer, he takes the entire drawer out and empties it on the bed, and then puts only those things back in that belong, and all in their proper place. This is essentially what Calvin did with his ‘theological drawer’. The principle – ‘reformed, and always reforming, according to the Word of God’ – is the motto. Of course, with this methodology, what you put back first in the drawer is of prime importance, because after that, all other things stand in the drawer in relation to that first thing. For Calvin, that first thing was the sovereignty of God, and the rest of his theology developed from there. What would happen if you put something else in first – for example, God’s loving nature?”

Reformed, and always reforming, according to the Word of God. This is the broad definition we seek to use – a methodology – not a specific set of interpretations. Can all interpretations be valid? NO! Can I prove mine are right and yours are wrong? Maybe, and maybe not. But the common ground on which we stand is the inspiration and authority of Scripture. God’s Word is never wrong. My interpretation of it may be in error, so I am willing to continue to go back and re-evaluate, and possibly even “reform” my theology, but it must be in accordance with the authoritative Word of God.

Some might say, “This will open the National Covenant Presbyterian Church to endless and pointless debates.” While we understand this perspective, we respectfully disagree. The Essentials of the Faith and the Ethical Imperatives are not open to debate for us. These are the foundation upon which we stand. The other issues in the Scriptures are those which we are willing to grant that Christians of conscience may disagree. We also are willing to identify those “distinctive” or “critical” beliefs we hold about which we are not interested in fighting over. For example, if you believe that the only *real* definition of “reformed theology” is to be found in the

Westminster Confessions, then rather than debate and fight over that, we recommend you join the EPC or the PCA. We consider them brothers and sisters in Christ, but we don't agree with them on the ordination of women, and we don't want to fight with them about it. We would rather respect their beliefs and work alongside them where we can agree while maintaining a separate ecclesiastical hierarchy. We would be happy to join with them under an umbrella such as the National Covenant Association of Churches, but the endless infighting within denominations needs to stop. It has achieved nothing useful and only weakened our witness to the world around us. That we won't agree with one another on everything is neither surprising nor distressing to the world. That we can't tell them what we do agree with each other about so that it appears that all we do is fight with one another, makes them want to avoid us at all costs – and we don't blame them!

Peace, purity, and unity of the Church; that was the vow we took. But without real unity, there can be no purity (a better word would be integrity) and therefore, no peace. We are proposing that we get that clarity about what we believe to be essential, imperative, and critical about the faith, and organize and act accordingly.

If you don't agree – that's your right. If you do agree – let's get started! The world has never been more in need of the Gospel to be presented with clarity, and integrity!