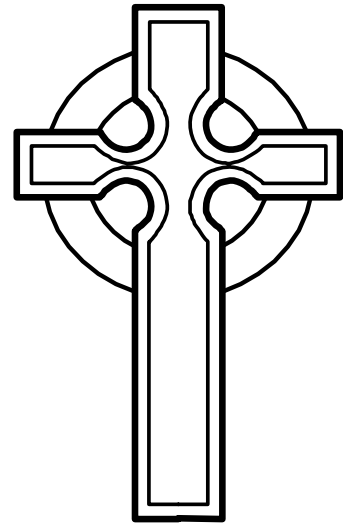


PROVIDENCE Reformed Bible Church

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Phone: 318-235-4721
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Sunday Schedule
9:30 AM Bible Study
10:30 AM Worship Service



What is a Reformed Baptist Church?

By Jim Savastio, Pastor
Reformed Baptist Church of Louisville
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INTRODUCTION

Some years ago a number of churches began to emerge, calling themselves “Reformed Baptists.” Since then the elders and members of these churches have been asked time and again such questions as, “What is a Reformed Baptist?” and “What are you trying to reform?” Many find it difficult to answer such questions in a concise and effective manner. Some simply say, “We are what Baptists used to be!” While this statement is certainly true, for most modern people, believers and unbelievers alike, it explains very little. It is, therefore, with the goal of helping both tongue-tied Reformed Baptists and their sincere questioners that this booklet has been written. In it I propose to answer the question “What is a Reformed Baptist church?” in a way that is both brief and substantial. In seeking to answer the question three things will be discussed: First of all I will address the difficulty of the question; secondly, a definition of the terms will be given; and finally, the key distinctives of Reformed Baptist churches will be articulated.

THE DIFFICULTY OF THE SUBJECT

The answer to the question, “What is a Reformed Baptist church?” is difficult for two reasons. In the first place, it is difficult to answer because the terms “Reformed” and “Baptist” are often seen to be at odds with one another. Many theologians, both Reformed and Baptist, would say that such a title is a misnomer. Some claim that it is not possible to be both Reformed and baptistic! Though Baptists have been and can be Calvinistic, it is said, they are not and cannot be Reformed. The reason for this charge is simple: Reformed theology is almost always associated with paedobaptism (infant sprinkling). Many who are Reformed in their theology view this perspective as the sine qua non of the Reformed Faith.

Secondly, the subject is difficult because there exists an ever-widening gulf between churches that call themselves Reformed Baptists. The term has not been copyrighted and, thus, there exists no definitive statement regarding who can lay claim to the title. You will find that no two Reformed Baptist churches walk in lock-step. Some churches call themselves “Reformed Baptists” when all they mean by that is that they hold to the so-called “Five points of Calvinism” and that they immerse believers. Other “Reformed Baptists” hold to the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 in its entirety, while yet a third group of “Reformed Baptists” hold to but a few of the articles. And although most Reformed Baptists hold to a Biblical and Puritan view of the Lord’s Day Sabbath, there are some who reject the doctrine as legalistic. In addition, Reformed Baptist churches differ in regard to their understanding of the exact application of the Regulative Principle of worship (the conviction that the Bible alone dictates the worship and life of the church), in regard to who is invited to the Lord’s table, to Bible translations, hymnals, the structure of prayer meetings, ministerial training, the nature of the pastoral office, denominations, and associations, etc., etc.

I must, therefore, explain the parameters of this study. Since the term “Reformed Baptist” is not copyrighted or patented (we could perhaps wish it were to avoid confusion!), I must define what I mean when I am using the term. The heart of this study will center around churches that adhere to the 1689 Confession in practice as well as in theory. This will settle

beforehand such controversial issues as the so-called “Law and Grace Debate,” the issue of the Regulative Principle, and the doctrine of the Lord’s Day Sabbath. To adhere to the Confession in practice as well as in theory is to have such doctrines an integral part of that truth “most surely believed among us.”

A DEFINITION OF TERMS

Two questions will be answered under this heading: 1) What do we mean by Reformed? and 2) What do we mean by Baptist?

What We Mean By “Reformed”

We have taken the name “Reformed” deliberately, and we have done so for two reasons. First of all, it helps to explain something of our historical and theological roots. There is a body of theological beliefs that is commonly referred to as “The Reformed Faith.” Such Biblical truths as *sola fide* (justification by faith alone), *sola gratia* (salvation by God’s grace alone), *sola scriptura* (the Bible alone is the basis for faith and practice), *solus Christus* (salvation through Christ alone), and *soli Deo gloria* (the fact that God alone is to receive glory in the salvation of sinners) are the hallmarks of the Protestant and Reformed Faith. The Reformed Faith is perhaps best known for its understanding that God is sovereign in the matter of man’s salvation. That is to say, that God has, before the foundation of the world, chosen certain sinners for salvation. He has done so sovereignly and according to His own good pleasure. The Reformed Faith teaches that, in time, Christ came and died for the sins of the elect—those who were chosen before time began. It teaches that in conversion the Holy Spirit, working in harmony with the decree of the Father and the death of the Son, applies the work of redemption to the elect. (See Ephesians 1:3ff)

Therefore, when we say that we are Reformed we are saying that we embrace, as biblical, that system of theology known as the “doctrines of grace”: doctrinal truths that set forth the total depravity of man, the unconditional nature of election, the limited or particular nature of the atonement (that is that Christ shed His blood specifically for the same people that the Father elects and that the Spirit regenerates), the irresistibility of the effectual call, and the perseverance and preservation of the saints. But the Reformed Faith touches on far more than these basic truths regarding God’s glory in salvation. The Reformed Faith is concerned with God’s glory in the church, in society, in the family, and in a life of holiness. The Reformed Faith as a high and God-centered view of worship. The Reformed Faith embraces a high view of God’s law and of His church. In this “Reformed” tradition are the great names of Church history. John Calvin, John Knox, John Bunyan (author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*), John Newton (author of “Amazing Grace”), the famous Bible commentator Matthew Henry, the great evangelist George Whitefield, the great American theologian Jonathan Edwards, Adoniram Judson, William Carey, C.H. Spurgeon, A.W. Pink and a host of others all held tenaciously to the Reformed Faith. We must underscore, however, that we hold to these truths not because great men of church history held to them, but because Jesus and the apostles so clearly taught them.

Out of this theological understanding came the great Reformed confessions and creeds—the Synod of Dort, The Savoy Declaration, The Westminster Confession of Faith, and The Heidelberg Catechism. The Confession of Faith held to by Reformed Baptist churches is deeply rooted in these historic Reformed Documents (in most places it is an exact word for word copy from the Westminster and the Savoy). For these historical and theological reasons we lay hold of the title “Reformed.”

But we also use the term “Reformed” in a second way: We are seeking to reform ourselves and the churches of our generation back to the Bible. The vast majority of announcements from mainline denominations concerning the reformation of the church in recent days have been to move it away from its biblical and historical roots to that which is man-centered and culturally pleasing. There is a reformation going on in our day. It is an attempt to change the nature of the church from the House of God to the House of Entertainment. Sinners are being coddled rather than convicted. God’s power and majesty are things of a bygone era!

Reformed Baptists are making it their aim and ambition to come more and more in line with the Word of God. In this sense Reformed Baptist churches are not static. We do not claim to have arrived. We want to go back again and again to the Scriptures, so that we might continue forward to “finish the race” in a way that is pleasing to God. We do not want to do things because the Puritans did them or because other Reformed churches do them, we want to do what we do because we see it in our Bibles. “To the law and to the testimony” (Isaiah 8:20) must be upon our banners!

As modern-day reformers, Reformed Baptists are seeking to call all churches everywhere to repent from their man-centered ways, their man-pleasing worship, and their shallow theology. We are, if need be, willing to stand as a lone “voice in the wilderness,” calling the church of Jesus Christ to its Biblical beauty and uniqueness. It is our desire to see all churches have a “zeal for God’s house eat them up.”

What We Mean By “Baptist”

The name Baptist is a form of verbal shorthand for us to convey certain truths. First of all, we are using it to state the Biblical truths concerning the subjects and the mode of baptism. When we speak of the subjects of baptism, we refer to the truth that baptism is for believers only. We as Reformed Baptists owe a great debt to our paedobaptist brethren. Their writings have shaped us, challenged us, warmed us, and guided us again and again. We count them as our dear brethren. However, the Bible is not silent about the issue of baptism. The fact that baptism is for believers only is the clear and, we believe, indisputable teaching of the Word of God. The subjects of baptism are not to be discovered in Genesis (though it is my contention that a correct understanding of the Abrahamic Covenant proves believers' baptism and demolishes infant baptism!), but in the Gospels and in the Epistles. Baptism is an ordinance of the New Covenant which must be understood in the light of New Covenant revelation. I assert as clearly and as plainly as I know how that there is not one single shred of evidence in the pages of the Old or New Testament to support the notion that the infants of believers are to be baptized. Every single biblical command to baptize and every single biblical example of baptism, as well as every doctrinal statement regarding the symbolic nature of baptism, proves that it is for believers only. I would strongly encourage you to take up your concordance and examine every text—along with its context—in which the word baptism and its cognates are used. As you do so, ask yourself such elementary questions as, “Who is being baptized?” “What does baptism signify in this text?” and, “Of whom are these things true?”

By “mode” we are referring to the fact that baptism is properly and biblically administered by immersion. The common Greek word for immersion or dipping is the word used in our New Testaments. The argument that the word has an occasional historic example meaning ‘to pour’ or ‘to sprinkle’ is surely special pleading. There are perfectly good Greek words meaning ‘to sprinkle’ and ‘to pour.’ In fact, there are numerous occasions in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT) where the Greek words for immerse and sprinkle are used in the same context but with their distinct and separate meaning intact. (Such as the instances of the priest dipping his finger in blood and sprinkling an object—see Lev. 4:6, 4:17, 14:16, 14:51, and Num. 19:18 for a few examples).

Secondly, the name Baptist is meant to convey that only those who are converted and baptized have a right to membership in Christ's church. This is often referred to as a regenerate membership. A careful reading of the NT epistles shows that the Apostles assumed that all the members of Christ's churches were “saints,” “faithful brethren,” and “cleansed by Christ.” Sadly, many Baptist churches of our day are more concerned with having a “decisioned membership” and a “baptized membership” than a regenerate membership. It is the duty of the pastors and people of true churches to ensure, according to the best of their ability, that no unconverted person makes his or her way into the membership of a church.

THE DISTINCTIVE MARKS OF A REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

Someone may be saying, “I understand all of that, but what practical difference can be seen in Reformed Baptist churches?” How does this theology work itself out practically? Let me say at the outset that numerous truths concerning the marks of true churches are not here dealt with. All true churches must be marked by such things as love for Christ, the presence of the Spirit of God, sincere and earnest love for the brethren, and heartfelt prayer and devotion among God's people. My purpose here is to lay out the practical differences that exist in our particular churches.

Reformed Baptist congregations are distinguished by their conviction regarding the sufficiency and authority of the Word of God. While all true Christians believe in the inspiration and infallibility of the Word of God, all do not believe in the sufficiency of the Bible. All true Christians believe that the Bible was “breathed out” by God and that it is infallible and without error in all of its parts. To deny this is to call God a liar, and hence, to lose your soul.

But while all true Christians believe this, all do not seek to regulate the life of the church in every area by the Word of God. There is a common belief, whether it is clearly stated or not, that the Bible is not a sufficient guide to tell you “how to do church.” This is behind much of what we see in the modern church growth movement, and it is founded by and large upon a belief that the Bible is silent regarding the nature and purpose of the church. It is for this cause that many feel the freedom to “reinvent the church.” For some reason, many believers seem to argue that God has no principles in His Word concerning the corporate life of his people! In these days, the clarion cry of all Christ-appointed shepherds of sheep needs to be that of the prophet Isaiah: “To the law and to the testimony! If they speak not according to this word it is because there is no light in them.”

Reformed Baptists have a conviction that the Bible and the Bible alone tells us what a church is (see 1 Tim. 3:15). The Bible and the Bible alone defines the offices of the church. The Bible tells us their number (two—elders and deacons), their qualifications, and their function (See Acts 20, 1 Tim.3, Titus 1, Heb. 13, and 1 Peter 5). The Bible is a sufficient guide to tell us what worship is and how it is to be given (see Deut. 12:32, Lev. 10:1ff; John 4:23, 24), as well as who can be a church-member, and what is required of those members.

The Bible is also sufficient to tell us what we are to do as a church, how we are to cooperate with other churches, how we are to send out missionaries, train men for the ministry, and a host of other things related to God's will for His people. Paul

told Timothy that the God-breathed scriptures would make the man of God complete, and that it would thoroughly equip him for every good work (2 Timothy 3:17). Can words be any more plain? If this text does not teach us to have confidence in the Bible and to look to the Scriptures for everything that God calls the church to do, then what does it teach? We have plenty of conservative churches in our day who believe the Bible, but not enough who are defined by the Bible!

Reformed Baptist churches are distinguished by an unshakable conviction that the church exists for the glory of God (Eph. 3:21, 5:26, 27 and 1 Timothy 3:15). Because the church exists for the glory of God, the worship of God and the Word of God are central to its life. We have seen far too much at the present hour to indicate that the measure of a church is seen in what it has to offer man—the typical questions asked of a church are “Does it meet ‘felt needs?’” “Is it fun, is it relaxing, is it entertaining?” “What are its kids’ programs?” “Is it a place to meet people?”

But we believe that churches need to be far more concerned with the smile of God than with the smile of man, and that a suitable counter-question might be, “Whose house is it, anyway?” The answer is that the church is God’s house and not man’s. It is the place where He meets with His people in a special way. However, this does not mean that it is to be a dull, grim, unfeeling, insensitive place. The place where God dwells is the most glorious place on earth to the saint and it is an oasis to the thirsty soul of a sinner seeking the grace of God. However, the place of God’s dwelling is also solemn and holy. “How awesome is this place—it is no other than the house of God and the gate of heaven,” was Jacob’s exclamation in Genesis 28.

It is this conviction that explains the reverence and seriousness with which we approach the worship of God. Reformed Baptist churches are distinguished by their conviction that the local church is central to the purposes of God on the earth. We live in the time of the “para-church.” We live in the day of independently-minded Christians who floats from place to place without ever committing themselves to the church. This “Lone Ranger” attitude is not only spiritually dangerous, but it is thoroughly contrary to the revealed mind of God.

While many have rightly diagnosed the failure of the church to do its mission, the answer is not to abandon the church, but rather to seek its reformation and its biblical restoration. The church alone is the special dwelling place of God upon the earth (Eph. 2:22). The great commission of the church is fulfilled as preachers of the gospel are sent out by local churches to plant new churches by means of conversion, baptism, and discipleship. Many well-meaning organizations are seeking to take upon themselves the task that the living God entrusted to His church. To whom has God entrusted the missionary mandate? To whom did God give instructions for the discipleship and encouragement and shaping of believers? To whom did God entrust the equipping of the saints and the training of men to lead the next generation? If the all-sufficient Bible answers that all these are the responsibilities of the local church, are we free to ignore it in light of the status quo? Do we simply throw up our hands and admit that these things just won’t work? Or do we take up our duty with courage, believing in the justice of our cause? May God help us to embrace our identity!

Reformed Baptist churches are distinguished by their conviction that preaching is foundational to the life of the church. How is God most often pleased to save sinners? How is God most often pleased to exhort, challenge, and build up his saints? How is Christ most powerfully displayed to the mind and heart? It is through the preaching of the Word of God! (1 Cor. 1:21; Eph. 4:11-16; 2 Tim. 4:1ff)

Therefore, as Reformed Baptists, but more particularly as serious, biblically-minded Christians, we reject the trends of our day toward shallow teaching, cancelled preaching services, the giving of the services of worship over to testimonies, movies, drama, dance, or singing. The Word of God is to be central in the worship of God.

Paul warned of the day that would come when professed churchman would no longer tolerate sound doctrine. He stated that according to their own desires they would heap up for themselves teachers who would tickle their itching ears. The apostolic command thundered forth to Timothy, that in the midst of such mindless drivel he should “Preach the Word!” (2 Tim. 4:1ff).

We abominate lazy preaching and unfaithful shepherds who will not feed the sheep. The condemnation of the Word of God is clear to such: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD to the shepherds: “Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks?”’ (Ezekiel 34:2).

Reformed Baptist churches are distinguished by the conviction that salvation radically alters the life of the convert. It is tragic that such a thing needs to be mentioned. We live in the day of decisionism. The idea is that you pray a certain formula prayer and are therefore declared to be saved. It matters not whether you break with sin or pursue holiness (Heb. 12:14). You can live like hell and go to heaven! What a bargain! Many popular Bible teachers claim this as a great defense of the grace of God. We see it clearly as a “turning of the grace of God into licentiousness” (Jude v. 4). When Paul describes the conversion of the Ephesians in chapter five he uses the greatest antonyms in the human language—you were darkness but now you are light in the Lord. And in 2 Cor. 6:14 Paul asks the rhetorical question: “What

fellowship has light with darkness?” The Jesus we proclaim is a great Savior. He does not leave His people in their lifeless condition. We proclaim the Jesus who came to save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). We proclaim the biblical truth that if anyone is in Christ he is a new creature (2 Cor. 5:17). We proclaim the Jesus who came to make a people zealous for good works (Titus 2:14). We reject as unbiblical the modern notion that a man can embrace Christ as Savior and reject his Lordship. The word of God nowhere teaches that Christ can be divided. If you have Christ at all, you have received a whole Christ—Prophet, Priest, and King.

Reformed Baptist churches have a conviction that the Law of God (as expressed in the Ten Commandments) is regulative in the life of the new covenant believer (see Jeremiah 31:31-34 and 1 John 2:3,4). Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:19 that, “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, keeping the commandments of God is what matters.” We assert to this antinomian (lawless) age of Christianity, which makes no demands on its “converts,” that God’s way of holiness has not changed. The law written on the heart in creation is the same law codified in the Ten Commandments on Sinai, and the same law written on the hearts of those who enter into the New Covenant. The Apostle John tells us that if we claim to know God and yet do not keep His commandments, we are liars and the truth is not in us. Jesus told His disciples that the way in which they would demonstrate that they truly loved Him was by obeying His commandments. Jesus tells us in Matt. 7 that many professing Christians will find themselves cast out on the last day because they were “practicers of lawlessness” who did not do the Father’s will (i.e. obey His commandments).

Among the laws of God none is so hated as the thought that God requires believers to give of their time to worship him and to turn from worldly pursuits. In recent years many have leveled an unrelenting attack upon the Fourth Commandment. The Presbyterian pastor and Bible commentator Albert Barnes once wrote, “There is a state of things in this land that is tending to obliterate the Sabbath altogether. The Sabbath has more enemies in this land than all the other institutions of religion put together. At the same time it is more difficult to meet the enemy here than anywhere else—for we come into conflict not with argument but with interest and pleasure and the love of indulgence and of gain.”

We agree with John Bunyan, who said, “A man shall show his heart and life, what they are, more by one Lord’s Day than by all the days of the week besides. To delight ourselves in God’s service upon His Holy Day gives a better proof of a sanctified nature than to grudge at the coming of such days.”

Modern man is so addicted to his pleasures, his games, and his entertainment that the thought that he must give them up for twenty-four hours to worship and to delight in God is seen as legalistic bondage. It is a particular grief to see those who profess to love Jesus Christ shrink from turning from their own pleasures. To God’s people, who love His law and meditate upon it to the delight of their blood-bought souls, such a commandment is not bondage, but a precious gift. Reformed Baptist churches are distinguished by a conviction regarding male leadership in the church. Our age has witnessed the feminization of Christianity. God created two sexes in creation and gave to each different corresponding roles. While the sexes are equal in Creation, the Fall, and Redemption, God has nonetheless sovereignly ordained that leadership in the home, the state, and the church is to be male. It is our experience that those whose minds have been unduly influenced by this generation find our worship, leadership, and family structure to be jarring. When the Bible speaks of husbands and fathers leading the home (see Eph. 5, 6, and Col. 3) it is not culturally conditioned. When the Bible speaks of men leading in prayer, teaching, preaching, and serving as elders and deacons (see 1 Tim 2 and 3), we must bow with submissive and dutiful hearts. Culture must not carry the day in the church of Jesus Christ!

Reformed Baptist churches are distinguished by a conviction regarding the serious nature of church membership. We take seriously the admonition of Heb.10:24, 25 to “...stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together...” We take seriously the duties and responsibilities of church membership. In other words, membership actually means something in Reformed Baptist Churches. There ought not to be a great disparity between Sunday morning and evening and mid-week. The same membership is expected to be at all the services of the church. It is impossible to share in the life of the church in the manner which God intended and to willingly absent yourself from its public gatherings. We recognize that few churches would make such a demand, but biblical churchmanship presupposes such a commitment to God, your pastors, and your brothers and sisters.

In closing let me seek to apply these things to our hearts. First of all, a word to my fellow Reformed Baptists. Let us see the importance of our distinctives. I urge you not to surrender them to the pressures to conform to modern Christianity. To those who are considering joining such a church, I encourage you to count the cost. Realize that you are committing yourself not only to a local body, but to these distinctives as well. If you are a Christian your only excuse for leaving a church committed to such principles is to find one that is more biblical—not less.

To our children, I would say that our greatest desire is your conversion to Christ. But after that great transformation we long to see you embrace these biblical truths and to exceed us in your biblical convictions and practices! This, then, is what we mean when we say that we are Reformed Baptists. If these truths have echoed in your heart as biblical, it is our desire that you will seek out a safe place for the feeding and nurturing of your never dying soul.

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