



WHAT IS A  
**REFORMED BAPTIST?**  
*AN OVERVIEW OF DOCTRINAL DISTINCTIVES*



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TOM HICKS

FOREWORD BY THOMAS K. ASCOL



**FOUNDERS**  
MINISTRIES

What Is A Reformed Baptist?  
*An Overview of Doctrinal Distinctives*

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*To the beloved people of First Baptist Church  
of Clinton, Louisiana, who are faithfully committed  
to the Lord Jesus Christ and the whole counsel of God.*







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## *Foreword*

**I**n the middle of the twentieth century, the modern Reformed Baptist movement began to take shape in America as several men, including some pastors and itinerant evangelists, began to embrace the doctrines of grace. These men found great help from the theological instruction coming out of Westminster Theological Seminary but could not embrace the paedobaptist view of the sacraments or church. Following the example of Charles Spurgeon in the nineteenth century and the Particular Baptists before him, they regarded the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith, commonly called the “1689 Confession,” to be a trustworthy expression of their beliefs.

They embraced the designation “Reformed Baptist” to describe their unity with other groups who hold to the doctrines that were clarified and propounded in the confessions that arose out of the Protestant Reformation. Some from both the Reformed and the baptistic branches of evangelicalism believe that moniker is an oxymoron. Baptists might be Calvinistic, but that does not make them Reformed.

Despite such criticism, a growing number of churches, institutions and organizations have identified as Reformed Baptist over the last several decades. Added to this has been the development and considerable growth of Reformed Baptist scholarship. As a result, more and more evangelicals and Christians from other traditions have taken note of this movement, which in turn has led to the frequent posing of the question, “What is a Reformed Baptist?”

That is the question that Tom Hicks answers in this carefully researched and imminently readable book. As one who unashamedly owns that description of his own views, Dr. Hicks explains what it means to be a Protestant Reformed Christian who holds to believers' baptism. He does so by providing biblical, theological, and historical insights that are widely recognized and affirmed by Reformed Baptists.

The result is a book that draws deeply from the 1689 Confession, showing how it summarizes biblical-theological views that are rooted in the orthodox, Protestant, reformational, and evangelical heritage that all Reformed Christians hold in common. Hicks also explains where and why Reformed Baptists part ways with other Reformed evangelicals on matters of church polity and practice.

This book is valuable for many reasons, not the least of which is the concise systematic treatment that it gives to key issues like what it means to be confessional, the threefold division of the law of God and the three uses of the moral law, proper principles for interpreting Scripture that take seriously the progressive nature of revelation, covenant theology, the relationship between law and gospel, regenerate church membership, the regulative principle of worship, and Christian liberty.

Each of these subjects is treated exegetically by citing key Bible passages that inform Reformed Baptist understanding and practice. Orthodox and Protestant history is also cited to demonstrate that these convictions are grounded in what the Lord taught our forefathers from His Word. In addition (and in one of the most useful features of this book), Hicks regularly shows how biblical teachings instruct our minds, shape our affections, and direct our wills.

He writes as a pastor who is determined to lead God's people to see and savor the beauties of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The result is a book that can and should be used to assist with basic Bible study of the teachings it addresses. While I recommend that the whole book be studied, each chapter (or even sections within chapters) can be easily

consulted to get careful, succinct treatments of key Reformed Baptist commitments.

Pastors who want to introduce churches to the healthy streams of belief and practice that are articulated in the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith (1689) will find a great aid in this book. Churches already committed to that confession should secure copies for every member and prospective member. The time and effort invested in working through these brief pages will be more than repaid in deeper appreciation for the biblical foundations and historical roots of the people known as Reformed Baptist.

Those of us in that doctrinal stream owe a debt of gratitude to Tom Hicks for serving us so well with this book. I highly commend it.

**Tom Ascol**

September 7, 2024





## *Introduction*

This book is not about staking out tribal distinctives. It was originally born out of a desire to write something for my local church about who we are and why we believe the things we believe. It is especially for laymen who are motivated to dig deeper and really understand the biblical and theological roots of our church's beliefs. It is crucial to understand, however, that we are not Reformed Baptists because of a desire to lay claim to a particular historical tradition, or because we have some blind devotion to an ancient confession of faith, or because we want to set ourselves up as theological elites who are superior to other Christians. Rather, we are Reformed Baptists because we believe it is the most biblical thing to be. Every Christian and every local church has to wrestle with the Word of God to understand what it means as a whole. Those who take the Bible seriously are trying to reach a conclusion about what the whole Bible means because they long to know God and the way of eternal life in Jesus Christ. While we respect our dear brothers and sisters who have taken this journey and come to different conclusions about the non-essential doctrines discussed in this book, our church has concluded that the Reformed Baptist faith is the best reflection of the teachings of the Scripture.

The reason Christians should try to understand the Bible as a whole, with good hermeneutics and sound reason, is not so we can best our theological opponents or achieve a feeling of personal righteousness. We have no righteousness before God except through Jesus Christ. We could win arguments while losing people and giving up ground to the enemy. Rather, the reason we want to know the full breadth of Scripture,

including its secondary and even tertiary doctrines, is that the Bible as a whole is God's sufficient Word to His beloved people. It not only reveals things necessary for eternal salvation but also tells us what we need to know for health, strength, and godly wisdom in this broken world. We need the secondary doctrines and practices discussed in this volume to weather the storms of life, repel the attacks of the evil one, resist the seductions of the world, and overcome the temptations of our own flesh. Christ gives His beloved bride the Bible, which is a very big book, because He wants us to have everything we need to run this race well. In Scripture, He gives us what we need to continue in faith through great hardship and difficulty, to endure this world of suffering and trial for our own good, for the good of our brethren, for the church's mission to the lost, and for the glory of our great God. Deuteronomy 32:47 says that God's Word "is no empty word for you, but your very life."

Another reason that Christians and local churches must understand the Word of God as a whole is that we need all of the Bible to support and defend the essential doctrines of God, Christ, and the gospel. The whole counsel of God is essential for a church to remain Christ-centered. If the doctrine of Christ is like the diamond on a ring, the secondary doctrines of Scripture are like the prongs that hold up the diamond. The secondary doctrines are not as beautiful as Christ, but when the church neglects them, the glorious truths about Jesus Himself start to become threatened. When churches opt for simplistic confessions of faith that correctly express the doctrines of Christ and the gospel but lack the fullness of biblical truth, they are, perhaps unknowingly, removing the prongs from the diamond ring that is the Christian faith. Later generations will lack the doctrinal substance necessary to continue confessing the gospel of Jesus. Thus, God requires churches to pass down the whole counsel of God to every new generation, so that the great truths about Jesus and His gospel are not imperiled through neglect of Scripture's secondary teachings, which form an interconnected whole.

This book began as a very small work intended to reach a lay audience. But as I wrote, I found myself wanting to express these truths in greater detail, while still trying to keep things relatively simple and

readable for motivated laymen. Thus, the book you are holding in your hands is written for laymen who want more than a brief introduction and are willing to think deeply. It is also written for pastors. I especially have in mind pastors who may not be Reformed Baptists. This is not a polemical work, but an attempt to state these truths positively. My prayer is that it will benefit broadly evangelical pastors, Baptist pastors, and Reformed paedobaptist pastors who want to understand what their Reformed Baptist brethren believe. Therefore, the book includes a history of Reformed Baptist theology, as well as explorations of the law of God, the covenants, the doctrine of the church, and Christian liberty. These are, in my view, the doctrines that help to locate Reformed Baptists within the broader stream of Christian orthodoxy, especially among evangelicals and other Reformed churches in our day. It is important for me to say that not every Reformed Baptist will agree with the way I have expressed every doctrine in this book. I do not claim to represent every Reformed Baptist. To be a faithful Reformed Baptist is to hold to one of our historic confessions of faith, especially the Second London Confession, and while I believe that what I have written here is within the mainstream of historic Reformed Baptist beliefs, there is room for variation on certain matters.

I would like to give special thanks to a number of people who helped me with the editing of various portions of this book, including Brandon Adams, Mitch Axsom, Jim Butler, Andrew Graham, D. Scott Meadows, Micah Renihan, and Caroline Williams. I am most grateful to Tom Ascol along with the other good brothers and sisters at Founders Ministries, who asked me to write on this subject and patiently worked with me as I wrote. I especially want to thank Fred Malone, my pastoral mentor, who taught me how to think pastorally and to apply Christ to His beloved people, and Tom Nettles, my doctoral supervisor, who taught me how all the doctrines of the faith are interconnected and integrated within Reformed Baptist theology. Above all, I am thankful for my wife, Joy, my beloved and my friend, who read every word of each draft and encouraged me along the way.







## *Historical Roots*

Who are Reformed Baptists? If you were to ask Reformed Baptists, they would likely say they are a people who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as revealed by the Bible. But that does not really describe Reformed Baptists because Reformed Baptists have specific convictions about the meaning of the Bible and thus the nature of Christ. So the real question is, “Who is Jesus Christ, and what do Reformed Baptists think the Bible means?”

In answer to that question, it would be correct to say that Reformed Baptists are people and churches who subscribe to the Second London Confession as a faithful summary of the Bible’s doctrines. The Second London Confession is in the same theological stream as the First London Confession,<sup>1</sup> and both of these confessions of faith were originally composed to show the overwhelming unity Reformed Baptists share with Reformed paedobaptists.<sup>2</sup> But identifying Reformed

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1. While these are “Baptist” confessions, the first Baptists in London did not think of themselves as Baptists. Thus, these confessions were not originally titled “Baptist” confessions, but were simply identified as London confessions.

2. Some think the First London Confession and Second London Confession differ on the doctrine of God’s law, that the Second London Confession is strong on God’s law and the Sabbath while the First London Confession does not teach these doctrines. But scholars have proven this to be wrong. Jim Renihan gives five reasons that there is no substantial theological difference between the two. First, the method of editing the confessions was the same. Second, the writings of the men who edited the confessions articulated the same theology. Third, many of the men signed both confessions, showing there is no substantial difference. Fourth, the preface to the Second London Confession expressly says that its substance is the same as the First London Confession. Fifth, the First London Confession was highly scrutinized by those who held to the Reformed doctrine of law, and it was not found to have a different position. See James M. Renihan, “No Substantial Theological Difference between the First

Baptists with their historic confessions of faith, which were published in the latter part of the 1600s, could give a wrong impression.

It might appear from the dates of their confessions that Reformed Baptist beliefs are only about four hundred years old. But in reality, Reformed Baptists trace their theological heritage back to the church fathers, down through the Middle Ages, to the Protestant Reformation and to the post-Reformation period. Reformed Baptists consciously identify with the broad stream of historic orthodox Christianity. Referring to the fact that God's truth is ancient, Jeremiah 6:16 says, "Thus says the LORD: 'Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.'" Isaiah 51:1 teaches that believers should remember their historical roots: "Listen to me . . . look to the rock from which you were hewn."

Thus, Reformed Baptists do not see themselves as an elite sect of Christians, but as standing within the stream of historic catholic Christianity.<sup>3</sup> Any discussion of Reformed Baptist theology, therefore, must account for Reformed Baptist doctrine as part of the ancient Christian faith, once and for all delivered to the saints. Because Reformed Baptists are catholic, the true Reformed Baptist spirit is also broad and catholic, recognizing that while they have their distinctive convictions about the meaning of the Bible, Christianity is bigger than any particular expression of it. In a sense, to be a Reformed Baptist is not to be anything special, but to be a Christian who stands within the historical theology of the church catholic, which is taught by the Bible and received by the best theologians of the church throughout history.

Therefore, to understand who Reformed Baptists are, we need to begin with church history. The history of the church is a history of

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and Second London Baptist Confessions," Founders Ministries, Accessed February 14, 2024, <https://founders.org/articles/there-is-no-substantial-theological-difference-between-the-first-and-second-london-baptist-confessions/>.

3. The term "catholic" does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church (the Papacy) but to the true church universal, which has existed throughout history. "Catholic Christianity" refers to the body of doctrines and practices of the historic Christian faith, which are either expressly set down in Scripture or necessarily contained in it.

God's people clarifying and defending their articulation of God's truth over and against heresies that emerged from within the kingdom of darkness and threatened to subvert the kingdom of God. Church history is often messy because the visible church was so frequently led away from certain points of truth by the seduction of false teaching. However, God faithfully continued to send theologians and ministers of His Word who would defend the gospel and its necessary theological basis.<sup>4</sup>

When we examine the history of the church's doctrine in retrospect, we find that the church fathers were often at their clearest, and best, when orthodoxy was under the most intense attack.

Over the centuries, amid heated controversies, the fathers formulated doctrines that have proven to be faithful expressions of the inscripturated Word of God and have nourished God's people. Reformed Baptists especially agree with the church fathers at these points. What follows is a simplified doctrinal history of the church, to show that the cherished doctrines of the Reformed Baptists and their confessions of faith did not emerge in seventeenth-century England, but are rooted in the historical faith, once for all delivered to the saints.<sup>5</sup>

### The Apologists: The Bible

One of the first controversies that plagued the church involved the doctrine of the biblical canon. The term "biblical canon" refers to the books that are accepted as biblical.<sup>6</sup> From the very beginning, the church faithfully received the Scriptures that the apostles handed down to them. They accepted the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament that Christ affirmed during His earthly ministry. They also acknowledged the twenty-seven books of the New Testament based on three criteria:

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4. One of the best entry-level introductions to the story of church history is Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 6th edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021).

5. An excellent history of doctrine, or theology, is Bengt Hägglund, *The History of Theology*, 4th rev. ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007). Another very good doctrinal history is John D. Hannah, *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001).

6. For an excellent treatment of the biblical canon, see Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).

- First, the books of the New Testament had to be authored by an apostle or someone closely associated with an apostle.
- Second, they had to have the same orthodox doctrine as the apostles and the rest of the Scriptures.
- Third, they needed to be books that were received by Christ's church from the very beginning.

Thus, while various church leaders and groups questioned the inclusion of certain books of the canon, there was never any serious or lasting question as to which books *are* sacred Christian Scripture among Christ's people as a whole. Nevertheless, during the first two hundred years after Christ's death, false teachers began to attack the biblical canon. Gnostic heretics wickedly claimed that the Old Testament is evil because it was inspired by a wicked god called the Demiurge, who created the material world. Gnostics believed that the god who created matter is different from the true God of the New Testament.

But the Apologists, early church fathers such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, made the case for what Christians had always believed: that the Old Testament is Christian Scripture; that the one true God created the world; that the material world is inherently good, though fallen; and that the twenty-seven New Testament books are consistent with the Old Testament. The early church fathers firmly rejected the Gnostic writings, which falsely claimed to be part of the New Testament.

During these debates of the first hundred years, the church reclaimed the doctrine of the biblical canon, which had been recognized from the beginning. The church once again reaffirmed the biblical canon at the Council of Carthage in AD 397.

Reformed Baptists accept the sixty-six books of the Bible received by the early church and reject the false writings of the Gnostics. They also reject the apocryphal writings of the intertestamental period, which were wrongly considered to be true Christian Scripture for the first time at the Council of Trent in the 1500s, when the Roman Catholic Church added them to their Bible.

## **Athanasius and the Nicene Creed: The Doctrines of God and the Trinity**

Along with all orthodox Christians, Reformed Baptists gladly receive the major creedal formulations of the early fathers of the Western church, which clarify the nature of the Trinity and of Jesus Christ over and against the demonic doctrines of heretics.

Athanasius and the church fathers earnestly contended for the true faith against the false teaching of Arius, who heretically claimed that Jesus Christ is not God. Arius taught that the Son of God was God's greatest creation, but that the Son is not God subsisting as the Son, eternally generated from the nature of the Father. This same error is committed by Jehovah's Witnesses today.

Understanding the significance of this error, Athanasius strenuously argued that Jesus Christ must be true God for two reasons: First, He saves us from our sins, and second, we worship Him. God alone is able to save, and we may only worship God; therefore, Christ must be God, just as the Word of God teaches (John 1:1). Thus, Athanasius and the other faithful fathers at the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) reasserted the biblical doctrine of the Trinity in the Nicene Creed.

Reformed Baptists thus accept the ancient creeds that affirm the Bible's doctrine of the Trinity and Christ's divine sonship, including the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. They join the universal church in denouncing the Gnostic heretics, who deny Christ's human nature, and the Arians, who deny that the Son is God. The doctrines of these ecumenical creeds are also found in the Reformed Baptist confessions.

Reformed Baptists warmly accept the teaching of the universal church on God and the Trinity as accurately expressing the teaching of the Word of God. The Bible teaches that God is one simple and indivisible being (Ex. 3:14; Deut. 6:4) who eternally subsists in three persons: the Father, who is neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son who is eternally begotten from the Father (John 1:1, 14); and the Holy Spirit,

who eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son (John 15:26). Reformed Baptists are strong classical Trinitarian theists.

### **Augustine of Hippo: The Doctrine of Human Nature and Effectual Grace**

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) defended the Bible’s doctrine of fallen human nature over and against the man-centered heresy of Pelagianism. A British monk named Pelagius taught that God graciously gives human beings a nature able to obey His gracious commands. Pelagius believed God’s commands imply human ability to obey them. So he insisted that anyone may obey God if he chooses to obey.

But Augustine rejected Pelagius’s doctrine of human ability and taught instead that fallen human beings are unable to obey God, unless God gives them effectual grace that makes them able and willing (John 6:44). Augustine famously wrote, “Give what you command, and then command whatever you will.”<sup>7</sup> He also taught the doctrine of unconditional predestination, that God graciously chooses some fallen human beings and gives them the necessary effectual grace to be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:5).

Reformed Baptists heartily affirm Augustine’s doctrine of fallen human nature that is utterly incapable of renewing itself or bringing itself to God. They also affirm the doctrine of predestination and the necessity of effectual grace to bring the elect to God. They confess this as the clear teaching of God’s holy Word.

### **Anselm and the Middle Ages: Theological Method and Atonement**

Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) was one of the faithful church fathers of the Middle Ages. He wanted his students to understand why they believed what they believed. He saw that it is not enough merely to believe the biblical doctrines of the faith. Rather, biblical doctrines

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7. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A., ed., *WSA*, Part 1, Vol. 1, trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B., *Confessions*, Book 10, Chapter 29 (New York: New City Press, 1997), p. 263.

ought to be understood with the proper use of reason. This is a tradition that would later be called scholasticism.

In his *Proslogion*, Anselm taught that theology is “faith seeking understanding.” He further explained, “Unless you believe, you will not understand.” Both of these ideas arise from Augustine’s doctrine of human nature. Sinful human beings must exercise reason by free grace through humble faith if they wish to understand the truth of God’s Word properly.

So Anselm not only affirmed Scripture’s final authority, but as a scholastic in his theological method, he also believed in using reason to synthesize and explain the truths of the Bible as a whole. Anselm employed logic and reason in the work of theology because he understood that reason comes from God, and that perfected reason is nothing other than the being of God Himself (the eternal Word or *logos*).

Reformed Baptists agree with the tradition that students of Scripture should make humble use of reason and the laws of logic, by faith, when studying the Word of God. The Bible teaches that Paul was skilled in knowledge (2 Cor. 11:6), as were Moses (Acts 7:22) and Apollos (Acts 18:24). In Isaiah 1:18, God speaks to His people and says, “Come now, let us reason together.” The Bible reasons with us about its own teachings and therefore models faithful reasoned reflection on God’s truth.

Anselm used his method of “faith seeking understanding” when thinking about the doctrine of Christ and His atonement. In his book *Cur Deus Homo (Why God Became Man)*, Anselm asked, why did the Son of God have to become man in order for God to forgive sin? Couldn’t God simply cancel the debt of a sinner by kingly fiat as a mere act of His will? Anselm reasoned that such a thing would be impossible because God had been dishonored by the sin of human beings. Therefore, God the Son, who has infinite value, had to assume a human nature so that He could die and restore the honor of God.

Reformed Baptists wholeheartedly receive the biblical and historic teaching of the necessity of Christ’s incarnation and atonement for the redemption of sinners (Luke 24:26; Heb. 9:22).

Later, Thomas of Aquinas (1225–1274) continued in this scholastic tradition as a systematizer of the faith. He received Nicene orthodoxy, making contributions to the doctrine of God and other biblical doctrines, though Thomas did not accept the historic biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. In his foreword to the first volume of his *Reformed Dogmatics* (not in the English version), Herman Bavinck writes, “Irenaeus, Augustine and Thomas do not belong exclusively to Rome; they are Fathers and Doctors to whom the whole Christian church has obligations.”

### **The Reformation: Sufficiency of Scripture and Justification by Faith Alone**

In the 1500s, the pope’s unbelief and greed led to the horrible oppression of God’s people. The papacy found an unbiblical way to make money for the Roman church’s enrichment from the people’s sincere faith. Heiko Oberman rightly explains that during this time there were two different schools of thought regarding the authority of the Bible.<sup>8</sup>

One school of thought, which Oberman calls Tradition 2, claims that the church is the supreme authority in all matters of doctrine. It holds that the Scriptures and church tradition are equally authoritative for doctrine because both come from God through the church. This led to the papist assertion of many extra-biblical doctrines and speculations, which has caused great harm to God’s beloved people.

The other school of thought, Tradition 1, is far older. It says that while God’s people should always consult the interpretive traditions of the church as an aid in understanding the Bible, the sixty-six books of the Bible alone are the Word of God, which is the church’s supreme and final authority.

The Protestant Reformation is best understood as a split between these two streams that coexisted within the church. The Protestants were part of the older tradition that held to the Bible as the final authority in all matters of doctrine and Christian practice. Protestantism,

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8. See Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow: Canon, 2001).



therefore, continued the faith of the ancient church, while Rome formed a new sect of papal authority and extra-biblical doctrine and practice.

Reformed Baptists fall within the very old tradition affirming *sola Scriptura* along with all Protestants (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

Many abuses and errors came from the pope's authoritarianism, but the heresy precipitating the Reformation was the selling of indulgences. By granting an indulgence, the papacy claimed it could dispense merits to save people from purgatory. The church sinfully sold these indulgences to pay for the construction of St. Peter's Basilica, among other things.

Johann Tetzel, a Dominican preacher with a flair for the dramatic, wickedly told the poor common folk, "When a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs," claiming that they could buy their salvation, along with the salvation of their relatives. He insisted that the church had authority to dispense these indulgences.

### *Martin Luther*

Martin Luther (1483–1546) vehemently protested against Rome's unbiblical doctrine of indulgences, which undermined the heart of the gospel. The church's faithful ministers joined Luther in earnestly speaking against the papacy's false and novel teaching about the church's authority to grant indulgences. These faithful ministers were called Protestants because they protested papal heresy and authoritarianism.

Martin Luther agreed with the older tradition that Scripture alone teaches that we are justified by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone, which gives God alone the glory for our salvation (Rom. 1:17; 3:28). Luther not only affirmed the sufficiency of the biblical canon, which he received from the early church, but also taught the doctrine of unconditional predestination, which he received from Augustine.

But the most important doctrine Luther recovered was the doctrine of justification by faith alone (Rom. 3:28; Gal. 2:15–16). Luther

saw that the Bible's distinction between the law and the gospel preserves them both. The law teaches that we are only justified before God based on perfect obedience, and since no one is perfectly obedient, the law condemns us. But the gospel teaches that Christ mercifully kept the law in our place so that we can be justified before God by faith alone. Christ paid the law's penalty and earned its blessing for all who trust in Him. Luther believed that God's moral law serves as the rule of life for the justified believer, not to justify him, but rather as the way to love God and to enjoy fulness of life in Him. This is the didactic use of the law for the believer.

The doctrine of justification by faith alone because of Christ alone was not original to Luther but is found in the early church fathers. Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and the Epistle of Diognetus, among others, all affirm the biblical doctrine of justification, which was recovered at the Reformation.

The Lord greatly blessed Luther's courageous stand for this glorious teaching. Justification by faith alone is at the very heart of the gospel. It glorifies the Lord Jesus Christ and forms the basis of the saint's assurance and comfort.

Reformed Baptists wholeheartedly receive the Lutheran and Reformed law/gospel theology and Christ-centered salvation, along with its fruit: the glorious doctrine of justification by faith alone and assurance of salvation on that basis.

But while Luther applied the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture to salvation, he did not consistently apply it to the church or its worship. As a result, Lutheran worship has more in common with the worship of the papacy than does Reformed worship.

### ***John Calvin***

John Calvin (1509–1564) was the great systematizer of the doctrines of the Reformation. The two main branches of Protestantism are Lutheranism and Calvinism, which is the root of Reformed theology. If Martin Luther had flashes of insight into biblical theology, John

Calvin systematized the Reformation's insights, demonstrating their internal coherence and how they lead to salvation and true worship, in his magnum opus, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*. Following Calvin, the Reformed tradition worked to formulate the church's doctrine on the basis of the Bible alone and to order all of theology from above, beginning with God. Reformed theology considers the Bible as a single, unified whole, sufficient for all matters of doctrine and godliness, and it aims to be consistently God-centered.

Like Luther, Calvin received the doctrine of the biblical canon and its sufficiency from the early church. He also accepted Augustine's doctrines of the fallen human nature and predestination based on the Bible. He further received Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone, which was not original to Luther but has deep roots in the ancient church. Unlike Luther, however, Calvin went on to apply the sufficiency of Scripture to the church's public worship.

Calvin and the Reformed tradition held to the regulative principle of worship, which teaches that the new covenant alone institutes elements of new covenant worship, and that all other elements of public worship are forbidden. The Bible alone teaches us how to worship.

This is different from the Lutheran and Anglican principle of worship, which the Reformed tradition calls "the normative principle." The normative principle says that while the church's worship should be consistent with the Bible, whatever the Bible does not expressly forbid is permissible in public worship.

Reformed Baptists gladly receive Calvin's God-centered hermeneutic, as well as the regulative principle of worship (Deut. 12:32; John 4:24), as faithful to the Word of God.

### **The Post-Reformation Period: More Systematizing and Identifying the Doctrine of the Church**

After the Reformation, the newly entrenched papal church launched an offensive against the churches of the Reformation. It deployed

sustained argumentation, in preaching and writing, against the biblical truths recovered by the Protestant Reformers.

Part of the Reformed response to this counter-Reformation was the renewal of scholasticism to develop arguments and doctrines to answer the challenges of their papist opponents.

While the Reformation of the 1500s recovered historical insights, expounded the Scriptures, and brought forth theologically sound conclusions, the post-Reformation theologians of the 1600s applied critical and constructive reason to further understand and express the doctrines of the Bible in light of papal distortions. They developed a methodology similar to that of Anselm and the medieval scholastics.

The Reformed scholastics had three basic elements in their methodology:

- First, they viewed Scripture as the supreme source and authority of doctrine. Thus, they sought to employ sound exegesis and the careful use of reason in the formulation of their doctrines, along with elements of philosophy as the handmaiden of theology.
- Second, they acknowledged and answered the strongest arguments against Reformed doctrine.
- Third, they sought to identify the place of Reformed doctrine in the history of Christianity, over and against heresy, showing how it accorded with or differed from the church fathers.

The clearest expressions of Reformed scholastic theology in this post-Reformation period are found in the Reformed confessional tradition. The Reformed churches produced a number of confessions of faith. The Dutch Reformed church confessed the Canons of Dordt and the Belgic Confession, along with the Heidelberg Catechism. The English Presbyterians confessed the Westminster Confession and the Independents confessed the Savoy Declaration. Reformed Baptists confessed the First London Confession and/or the Second London Confession.

By virtue of their confessionalism, Reformed Baptists agree with Anselm and the Reformed faith that we should make humble use of human reason to understand the doctrines of the Bible, over and against the Lutherans, who are generally more reluctant to apply reason in their articulation of theology.

In England during the post-Reformation period, there were great debates over the nature of the church, even though the heirs of the Reformed faith agreed on the gospel and most other doctrines. The Reformed Anglicans wanted an English state-church with an Episcopalian form of government. The English Presbyterians also sought cooperation between church and state, but with a Presbyterian form of government.

The Independents agreed with the Anglicans and Presbyterians that infants should be baptized, but they did not agree with any kind of formal church-state synthesis. They wanted a church that was independent from the state so that the state would have no authority over the church's doctrine or worship. They did not believe God's Word authorizes any formal union of church and state.

The Independents also believed in a congregational form of church government, which means that churches are not governed by any human hierarchy, but only by Christ speaking in His Word to the congregation as a whole. The congregation then elects elders and votes on matters of membership and discipline.

The first "Reformed Baptists" arose from within an English Independent church, the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey (or "JLJ") Church. In the 1640s, John Spilsbury, Sam Eaton with Richard Blount, Hanserd Knollys, and William Kiffin all came out of the JLJ church and founded "baptistic congregationalist" churches because, while they agreed with the Independents on almost all other doctrines, they disagreed on infant baptism. They came to Baptist convictions, holding that only credibly professing believers should be baptized and admitted to church membership (Matt. 28:16–20; 1 Cor. 1:1–9; 12:13).

It is important to understand that the first Reformed Baptists didn't see themselves as a certain kind of "Baptist." Rather, they viewed themselves as congregationalists with baptistic convictions when it came to the subjects of baptism. Thus, Matthew Bingham says that, within the stream of historic Christianity, they might be more accurately called "baptistic congregationalists" who have a Reformed and Puritan theology.<sup>9</sup>

It is common for teachers of Baptist history to identify Arminian "General Baptists" (Smyth and Helwys), who held to a general atonement, as part of the same group as the Calvinistic "Particular Baptists" (Spilsbery, Kiffin, Knollys), who held to a particular atonement. Most Baptist scholars today would say that the term "Baptist" merely identifies the genus of churches that baptize believers. Therefore, they think Baptist churches come in two different species: General Baptists (Arminians) and Particular Baptists (Calvinists).

But in his book *Orthodox Radicals*, Matthew Bingham correctly demonstrates that the General and Particular Baptists did not consider themselves two different kinds of Baptists. They would never have joined in formal association with one another, and, in fact, the Particular Baptists regarded the General Baptists as dangerously heterodox. Bingham writes that an "intransigent hostility to Arminianism was evident even among the more ecumenically minded baptistic ministers who were perfectly willing to commune with paedobaptistic congregationalists." Bingham notes that a letter from 1654 expresses gratitude to God who "through grace hath kept us sound in the faith, not any of us tainted with that Arminian poison that hath so sadly infected other baptized churches'. . . Paedobaptism could be tolerated, but the 'Arminian position' could not."<sup>10</sup>

The General Baptists had been heavily influenced by the continental Anabaptists and their theological errors. For example, the General Baptist John Smyth denied Augustinianism (rejecting both original

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9. Matthew C. Bingham, *Orthodox Radicals: Baptist Identity in the English Revolution* (New York: Oxford, 2019), 4, 40–49.

10. Bingham, *Orthodox Radicals*, 22.

sin and predestination) and collapsed justification and sanctification, compromising the gospel. To the Particular Baptists, such errors were a gross departure from biblical orthodoxy and a rejection of God's gracious salvation in Christ. The Particular Baptists saw the General Baptists as overturning the Reformation and moving toward the heresy of Pelagianism. Those early Particular Baptists saw the doctrine of fallen human nature and God's predestinating grace as something worth separating over within local churches, and even among associations of churches. In support of their position, one might consider the book of Romans, which includes a detailed treatment of the doctrine of predestination (Rom. 9). At the end of Romans, Paul exhorts the church to avoid those who teach against the doctrine of his epistle (Rom. 16:17–18).

In order to escape persecutions and difficulties in England, some Reformed Baptists crossed the Atlantic Ocean and came to America. Most of the earliest Baptists in America were Reformed Baptists. These early Reformed Baptists, under the influence of Benjamin Keach and his son Elias, edited and subscribed to the Philadelphia Confession and the Charleston Confession, which are nearly identical to the Second London Confession. The Philadelphia Confession adds a chapter on the laying on of hands and another chapter on congregational hymn singing, both of which were important doctrines for Keach. The Charleston Confession omits the chapter on the laying on of hands but retains a clear statement about congregational hymn singing.

Some think the Particular Baptist rejection of infant baptism and affirmation of the baptism of believers alone was itself a novelty in church history. But that is not accurate. The early Particular Baptists understood that prior to Augustine, the baptism of believers alone was widespread. In the early church, baptismal candidates were usually instructed for some time, and they only received baptism afterwards. The *Didache* (an ancient document composed in the first or second century), for example, clearly does not envision any kind of infant baptism, which proves that the practice of believers' baptism is very old. As further proof, consider that the tradition of the early church was to delay baptism until immediately before death. Even

though they were wrong to do so, they did it to avoid the baptism of unbelievers and to avoid any possibility of apostasy after baptism. Clearly, the early Christians were very serious about baptizing believers only, as Everett Ferguson demonstrates in his volume on the history of baptism.<sup>11</sup>

Reformed Baptists, therefore, are not a species of the genus “Baptist.” Rather, they are a species of the genus “Reformed.” Reformed Baptists are not a branch of a Baptist tree; rather, they are a branch of the Reformed tree. This is evident in that Reformed Baptists have much in common with other confessional Reformed churches, but they tend to have many substantial differences with other Baptists. Reformed Baptist identity is catholic first, then confessionally Reformed, and finally Baptist.

Some have suggested that paedobaptist churches of the Reformation are Reformed, while Reformed Baptists are not. They hold that believers-only baptism excludes Reformed Baptists from the Reformed tradition. They think that believers-only baptism is more of an ecclesiastical novelty than paedobaptism. But it is important to remember that there is a sense in which all of the church polities of the post-Reformation period were somewhat novel when compared to the time just before the Reformation. For example, unlike most earlier proponents of infant baptism, the English Presbyterians denied that baptism necessarily regenerates, and they founded their doctrine of infant baptism on a theology of the covenants in a manner that had no precise historical precedent. Similar things could be said about the polities and baptismal practices of Anglicanism and Independency. Baptist polity was no more or less novel than the other ecclesiastical polities of the post-Reformation period. Rather, Baptists were simply trying to apply

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11. Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013). See also David F. Wright, *Infant Baptism in Historical Perspective* (Eugene, Wipf and Stock, 2007); David F. Wright, *What Has Infant Baptism Done to the Church?* (London: Paternoster, 2006). Both of these were mentioned in James Renihan, “Believers’ Baptism (Part 5): Considered Within Church History,” *Theology in Particular* podcast, July 18, 2022, <https://theologyinparticular.libsyn.com/episode-50-believers-baptism-part-5-considered-within-church-history>.



the biblical doctrines of *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) and justification *sola fide* (faith alone) to the church.

In fact, all of the churches of the Reformation were seeking to bring their polities into line with the doctrines of the Reformation.

One significant feature of Reformed Baptist polity, which it shares with Independent polity, is that it de-coupled any direct relationship between the church and the state. The Reformed Baptists argued that this returned the church to its earliest biblical state, which did not seek direct authority in relation to the state. The Baptists also opposed any forcible conversions to Christianity because they believed that churches must be composed of those who voluntarily and credibly profess faith in Christ. This is not inconsistent with the thinking of the early church fathers. One early church apologist, Lactantius (250–325), wrote the following:

There is no occasion for violence and injury, for religion cannot be imposed by force; the matter must be carried on by words rather than by blows, that the will may be affected. Let them unsheath the weapon of their intellect; if their system is true, let it be asserted. We are prepared to hear, if they teach; while they are silent, we certainly pay no credit to them, as we do not yield to them even in their rage. Let them imitate us in setting forth the system of the whole matter: for we do not entice, as they say; but we teach, we prove, we show. And thus no one is detained by us against his will, for he is unserviceable to God who is destitute of faith and devotedness; and yet no one departs from us, since the truth itself detains him.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, the Baptists believed that the kingdom of Christ advances through the preaching and teaching of the Word and through sound reason, rather than by the force of the sword (John 18:36).

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12. Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7., ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1886), 5.20.

## The Twentieth Century: Where Did We Get the Term “Reformed Baptist”?

The term “Reformed Baptist” appears to have emerged in Pennsylvania in the 1950s. Some of the administrators at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia were Baptists and part of building up a Baptist church in that area.<sup>13</sup> These men held to the Second London Confession of Faith, which expressed the orthodox doctrine of God, Reformed soteriology grounded in the Bible’s covenants, and the Reformed doctrine of God’s law. In an era when dispensationalism was the prevailing evangelical hermeneutic, Presbyterians and confessional Reformed Baptists together began using the term “Reformed Baptist” to express unity in the essentials of the Reformed faith, while acknowledging differences in ecclesiology and baptism.

In Richard Muller’s chapter in *The Life and Thought of John Gill*, he recognized that the historic confessional Reformed Baptists fall within the Reformed tradition. Muller wrote:

English Baptist theology, is in large part an intellectual and spiritual descendant of the thought of those Reformers, Protestant orthodox writers, and Puritans who belonged to the Reformed confessional tradition. This must be acknowledged despite the pointed disagreement between Baptists and the Reformed confessional tradition over the doctrine of infant baptism: this one doctrine aside, their theology is primarily Reformed and what disagreements remain are nonetheless disagreements with and often within the Reformed tradition rather than indications of reliance on another theological or confessional model.<sup>14</sup>

In our present context, the term “Reformed Baptist” has been used in different ways. A Baptist who believes in the “five points of Calvinism” might call himself a Reformed Baptist, even if he does not accept

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13. James Renihan, “What is a Reformed Baptist?” *Theology in Particular* podcast, March 28, 2022, <https://theologyinparticular.libsyn.com/episode-34-what-is-a-reformed-baptist>.

14. Richard Muller, “John Gill and the Reformed Tradition” in *The Life and Thought of John Gill* (Boston: Brill, 1997), 51.

the Reformed hermeneutic or covenant theology. But, originally, the term did not merely refer to Baptists who embrace the five points of Calvinism, but to Baptists who held to the Reformed doctrines of God, law, covenants, justification, sanctification, and worship. Today, some Presbyterians do not like the term “Reformed Baptist” because they consider paedobaptism a necessary part of the system of Reformed theology. For them, the term “Reformed” must be reserved for a particular group of churches who hold certain confessions of faith.

Yet the term “Reformed Baptist” accurately describes the confessional Baptists who emerged from English Independency. Reformed Baptists are not merely soteriologically Calvinistic Baptists, but they are committed to their Reformed confessions of faith, especially the Second London Confession. They are firmly committed to the distinctive elements of the confessions that are not affirmed by other soteriological Calvinists or ecclesiastical Baptists.

### **Conclusion**

Reformed Baptists find themselves within the stream of the historic biblical and catholic faith. Reformed Baptists received the ancient doctrines of the biblical canon, human nature, effectual grace and predestination. They also received Reformed theology’s insistence that the church’s doctrine and worship must be based on Scripture alone, and that we are justified before God by faith alone and not by any human works of any kind.

So Reformed Baptists are not a sect but embrace all of the essential doctrines of the Reformation, which the Reformers found in the Scriptures, retrieved from the historic catholic church, further clarified in light of controversy, and enshrined in their confessions of faith. Any study of Reformed Baptists, therefore, must begin with a study of confessionalism in general, which is the subject of the next chapter.