

Reformed theology. As a distinct theological tradition arising out of the Protestant **Reformation*, Reformed theology commonly traces its roots back to the **Swiss Reformation* as represented by Ulrich **Zwingli* and John **Calvin*. While some distinguish Reformed theology from **Arminianism* using the **TULIP* acronym, the way in which some of these **doctrines* are articulated—especially at the popular level—can actually misrepresent the majority Reformed perspective, and focusing solely on these points neglects many other key features of the tradition. Together with other Reformational traditions such as **Lutheranism*, Reformed theology is committed to the five *solas* that prioritize God’s action and **grace* in Christ as the source and goal of all theology and the life of **faith* (**sola fide*, **sola gratia*, **sola scriptura*, **soli deo gloria*, **solus Christus*). The following eight points aim to characterize the unique combination of features that comprise Reformed theology, understood broadly.

First, Reformed theology is *canonical*. Scripture is God’s unique, **special revelation* and therefore the standard or canon for all theological reflection. While creation and God’s **general revelation* also play a vital role in Reformed theology, Scripture has primacy as the means by which believ-

ers gain **knowledge of God* for **salvation* and life. In fact, the label *Reformed* points first and foremost to how this tradition is open to ongoing reformation and reformulation so that its beliefs and practices correspond more faithfully to the **Word of God*.

Second, Reformed theology is *creational*. Highlighting the truth that the Triune God is the Creator of all things, this tradition emphasizes the goodness and beauty of creation. The material world—including our bodies and all that is “earthly”—is not intrinsically evil, but rather created gloriously good, with humans at the pinnacle of creation fashioned in the **image of God*. Such a perspective is why, for example, the Reformed tradition consistently values **vocational callings*, the role of **common grace*, environmental stewardship, the value of productivity and other features of embodied, creaturely life.

Third, Reformed theology is *comprehensive*. In light of this robust creational emphasis, the doctrines of **sin* and redemption are necessarily framed in a holistic manner. Sin disrupts and perverts the good creation by affecting the totality of the human person (mind, will, affections, body), the totality of our relationships (with God, neighbors and the rest of creation), and the totality of the universe (it too groans in expectation of

redemption). Reformed theology recognizes the extensiveness and intensiveness of sin's perverting presence, and this means Christians necessarily live in the tension between enjoying God's world and yet also fighting against sin's corruptive effects, both internally and externally. Similarly, redemption is understood in a comprehensive way as the Father through the Son and by the Spirit carries out his work of new creation. Just as sin affects everything, so God extends his love into every crack and crevice of his world as his people enter into the movement of divine grace. Because of Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead, we know that God's work of new creation is not just an inward reality (enlightening the mind, liberating the will, awakening affections) but also a physical, social and cosmic reality. Although this work of new creation is not yet complete, Christians are sustained by the hope of Jesus' return to rule over a new heaven and new earth.

Fourth, Reformed theology is *covenantal*. As the inspired **Word of God*, Scripture presents a unified story of **redemptive history* and God's covenantal relationship with his people and the rest of creation. Although there are different Acts in this covenantal drama (creation, fall, Israel, Jesus, church, new creation),

**biblical theology* in the Reformed tradition normally recognizes an organic relationship among all the Acts as they either foreshadow or follow the core of the drama, namely, the historical person and work of Christ. With Christ as the center of this covenantal reading of Scripture, one is able to discern both continuities and discontinuities between the Old and New Testaments, valuing the unity of the whole without flattening out the distinctive parts.

Fifth, Reformed theology is *Christ-centered*. Affirming a robustly trinitarian confession, Reformed theology often emphasizes the centrality of the Son: we worship none other than God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, yet the Father is most clearly revealed through the Son, and believers are united to the Son by the fellowship of the Spirit. Christ is the great mediator between God and humanity; God reveals himself most fully in Christ; Christ alone achieves the reconciliation of sinful humanity and divine holiness. To lose this Christocentric framework risks distorting theological and pastoral reflections. So, for example, while the Reformed tradition affirms the **sovereignty of God*, it is a truth that is often framed in a Christocentric manner. The Reformers were not primarily interested in abstract hypotheses and metaphysical

postulation about the divine essence and what divine power could or could not accomplish. Instead they anchored discussion about divine sovereignty in the historical Jesus who lived, died and rose again. To guide discussions of the sovereignty of God one must look to the tears and blood of Jesus on the cross and then to the power of his resurrection. When dislodged from this Christocentric perspective, Reformed views of sovereignty—and other key doctrines—easily become distorted and problematic.

Sixth, Reformed theology is *concordant*. Within the **covenant theology* and redemptive-historical approach already described, God is absolutely sovereign and humans are genuinely responsible. Unlike some expressions of **hyper-Calvinism*, therefore, Reformed theology normally affirms the mysterious concordance between God's **sovereignty*—both in salvation and **providence*—and genuine human agency, understood through the lens of **original sin* and the constant necessity of grace. For example, while faith is understood as a gift from God, it is not God, but the human agent as enabled by God's grace, who does the believing. This concordant dynamic also implies a distinctive relationship between **law and gospel*, as God gives

what he commands; God's radical grace does not nullify Christian obedience but rather empowers and sustains it. Reformed theology does not attempt to explain comprehensively the mysterious relationship between divine and human agency but rather seeks to affirm each to the degree that each is upheld in Scripture.

Seventh, Reformed theology is *confessional*. While situated within the catholic Christian **tradition*, Reformed theology generally affirms the distinctive features of several **confessions* and **catechisms* arising out of the **Swiss*, **German*, **Dutch*, **English* and **Scottish* Reformations, such as the **Heidelberg Catechism*, Canons of **Dort*, **Belgic Confession* and **Westminster Standards*. While the Reformed confessions grew out of and exhibit harmony with classic creedal orthodoxy, they also draw attention to contributions from the Reformation, such as the organic relationship between **justification* and **sanctification*, a rejection of **transubstantiation* in favor of **memorialism* or the spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, the three-fold offices of Christ as Prophet, Priest and King, the three uses of the **law*, and doctrines such as **election*, adoption and Scripture as the Word of God. From this confessional foundation, Reformed theology at its best is

able to maintain both its catholicity and its distinctness.

Eighth and finally, Reformed theology is *contextual*. It seeks to bring God's **revelation* and the lordship of Christ to bear on all areas of life in each culture and context, impacting everything from our corporate **worship* to our everyday **work*. In other words, Reformed theology articulates a comprehensive **worldview*, arising in response to creation, canon, creeds and confessions while always oriented toward particular contexts and aiming to interpret every idea and to orient every activity toward the glory of God in Christ.

Many believe that the way Reformed theology is expressed and lived out can be compared to three legs holding up a stool: doctrine, piety and cultural engagement. While different strands of the Reformed tradition express their "lived theology" by putting more weight on different legs, normally each of these legs remains part of the supportive structure.