

Our Reformed Heritage and Spirituality

We share much content and teaching with all the other historical churches -

- The Bible as the Word of God
- The Holy Trinity as the One and Only God we must worship.
- Respect, love and being in awe of God who is beyond our understanding - *“his thoughts are not our thoughts and his ways we cannot comprehend.”*

With historical churches we refer to denominations that we differ from in some instances but share the prayer and desire to continue to be the original, the New Testament Church.

(We think of Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists and all others rooted in the history of the early church and to a large extent the last 2000 years of service and worship.)

Yet we do not share so much with so-called new, modern or fashionable Christian groupings who look for a new way in a new age and in order to do so disregard what God taught his church in more than 2000 years!

So what do we emphasise as Reformed and Presbyterian believers:

a) The centrality of God, the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

b) The centrality of the Bible as inspired Word of God - where Biblical content and exegesis are not central to worship, teaching, preaching, sacraments and praise, it cannot be considered Reformed.

c) The centrality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the revelation of the way of salvation and of the revelation of the Triune God. Where the Gospel of Christ is neither taught nor celebrated, worship and spirituality cannot be seen as reformed.

1. Introduction:

Our worship and spirituality is rooted in the 16th century reformation of the Church of Christ.

The reformation of the Christian Church during the 16th century was led by spiritual and theological heroes such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox and many others. The reformation was a spiritual renewal, doctrinal inspiration and church growth phenomenon second to none other and it would change the Christian views of millions of Christians, shaped the thoughts of tens of thousands of theologians and ministers of the Church, founded the views of just as many philosophers on matters regarding the state, politics, democracy, science and every other important sphere of life.

This reformation history of the Christian Church had the greatest impact on the revival of the Church since the days of the apostles in the New Testament Church.

Our values and beliefs benefited from the genius, the humble and rock solid faith, piety and dependence on the work of the Holy Spirit of our reformation fathers.

The Reformed theology is popularly summarised by quoting the five “sola’s” or “only’s”, of the Reformed tradition, namely:

- *We should live our lives “only to the glory of God!”*
- *We know the Gospel truth “only from the holy Scriptures!”*
- *We are redeemed “only by the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ!”*
- *We are saved “only by grace!”*
- *We are justified “only through faith!”*

John Calvin became the leader of the Protestants in the city of Geneva, which became the centre of the Reformation in Europe. From Geneva Presbyterianism spread to Germany, Scotland, mainly through John Knox who studied under Calvin, to England, the Netherlands, Hungary, America and eventually across the globe, including amongst others, all the former Dutch and British colonies.

Today more than 80 million men, women and children throughout the world belong to ‘Reformed’ or ‘Presbyterian’ Churches.

The name ‘Reformed’ refers to Calvin’s intention to **establish a Church reformed according to the Word of God**. The name Presbyterian refers to our form of church government through ‘presbyters’ or elders - both ruling and teaching elders.

Bible centred teaching match our passion for God centred living and God centred faith and it is the origin of passionately seeking a just society, up to this day.

Calvin’s dream to promote religious toleration challenged the Church and the state. His views on the separation of the powers of Church and State where each is independent of the other yet accountable to God for everything they do, led to the **standards of democratic freedom** of both the individual and structures within society. Without these principles a free economy and science and technology liberated from both theological and political tyranny, would not have flourished.

The reformation was more influential over the centuries than any other world view that I know of. It was, for example the Calvinism of both President Woodrow Wilson of the USA and of General Jan Smuts of South Africa that inspired the establishment of the League of Nations after the First World War. It became the forerunner of the United Nations as we know it today.

Let’s contemplate the fruit of this remarkable contribution towards the development of the ideals of Biblical Confession and truly free societies, while we are inspired to seek answers for our own burning challenges of our age. Let’s also give thanks for millions of lives to the glory of God, in service of the Church of Christ and the struggles for the liberation of humanity for more than 500 years.

2. Our Reformed heritage owns a specific confession - our worship is confessional worship.

Which Christ do you follow?

Can we ever ignore our Reformed / Presbyterian Confessions and heritage, witnessing about the truth about salvation through the grace of the only one God and Saviour whom we know through the work of the Holy Spirit?

"Creed or Chaos" is the title of one of author **Dorothy Sayers'** most challenging books. Sayers was a brilliant Christian thinker *"who took doctrine seriously and became annoyed at the growth of fashion, schisms, heresies, and anti-christs within the Church of England"*. - (Quoting Sayers.)

Church growth and spiritual renewal movements that downplay the rich nourishment of the doctrines of the Bible in an effort to reach the unchurched, plague our time. *"We have no creed but Christ,"* is a battle cry of too many so-called "evangelists" today.

Ancient creeds and confessions from hundreds, or even thousands, of years ago, unfortunately became irrelevant to the *"excite me now or leave me alone"* culture. You hear Christian leaders, even ministers of the Word, saying: "I don't want to bring people to our Christian heritage. I just want to bring them to Jesus." Is it even possible to do so, if not in fellowship with the Apostolic church that taught the true Gospel for more than 2000 years?

If you are creedless the question remains, which Jesus do you follow?

If you stand on no teaching, doctrine or creed on whom Jesus is, how can you introduce him to those ignorant of him?

Did we forget that the Apostolic church in the New Testament often warned that we must be careful of what we teach, because there are a lot of "christs"?

One may wish to place what the church taught and preserved in her creeds and confessions on the back burner, to make room for a modern or a post modern Jesus that appeals to the masses of our day, but **which Christ** are we proclaiming then?

Doctrine, as our Christian heritage, shares with you the ultimate truth about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who takes away the sins of the world.

How can the teachings of the historic church be dry, **if the Holy Spirit led the church in the past as he does today**, showing us the true Christ and convicting us of sin - also the sin of honouring man-made, post modern gods. How can *the exciting growth of the church and the gracious preservation of the gospel of our Lord over centuries not be nourishing, exciting and unifying?*

Our unity lies within travelling on the same way, Jesus, confessing the same truth, Christ, and living the same life that only is and can be the Lamb of God.

Sadly the attitude that promotes creedless worship, where anything goes, has found its way into churches that fly the Presbyterian / Reformed banner too.

We cannot be too careful or we may go into the modern/post-modern night, "*blown about by every wind of doctrine*" or desire, as Paul taught the Ephesians. The Reformed church in the 21st Century faces a similar challenge that faced the Ephesian church. **Many want to promote denominations without identity, creed or position** on even the most crucial of the foundations of the Biblical gospel.

What is it to be reformed, but to embrace and to care for both the historic creeds and the Reformed confessions, as they all **summarize and explain** the only master of truth, faith and life, **God's Word in the Holy Scriptures?**

We have an **incredibly rich heritage**. It is neither dry nor boring; more than any other expression in history, the Reformed, meaning Biblical, confession has announced: "*Oh taste and see that the Lord is good!*"

May God bless every effort for his glory. But this can only happen if we adhere to the warning of the Apostle John in the Second Epistle of John:

8 Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. 9 Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. 10 If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. 11 Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.

3. Our Reformed heritage is a firm faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Romans 1: 16-17. I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

These verses, as part of Paul's introduction to the letter in Romans 1, explain Paul's boldness in proclaiming the gospel. He was "not ashamed of the gospel". And he boasted only in the gospel (Rom15:7-19). The reason for Paul's bold confidence was the power of the gospel message itself. The gospel is **"the power of God unto salvation,"** for both the Jew and the Gentile, both the church member and the agnostic, for both the backslidden and the sanctified.

We must be careful to ***instead of faith in the saving power of the gospel, rather put our trust in our methods to preach it.*** To love the wine skins more than the wine.

To have faith in our marketing strategies can so easily replace our firm belief in the simple gospel message that has the power of salvation, received in faith. Believing in

methods rather than in the Good News, has the risk of watering down and compromising the lesson of the reforming fathers that we are saved by grace, only through the gift of faith - that is, faith in the undiluted good news of the gospel, as proclaimed in the Scriptures, that Jesus Christ alone is the way, truth and the life.

If the gospel is itself God's mighty instrument of salvation, if it is the power of God resulting in salvation, then we need but to proclaim it, in simplicity, in purity, and in dependence upon God - and Godself will by his Word and Spirit save those who believe it. And save only those who believe it, by his grace.

Paul explains his boldness to proclaim the gospel in terms of what it reveals about God. The gospel, Paul says, reveals "the righteousness of God." The gospel displays that God is awesomely good. It reveals God's standards of holiness. **It reveals God's divine love by the way in which he saves people through faith, by pouring out his wrath on the Lord Jesus, so that sin's penalty is paid.**

The wine skins that carry the simple, powerful Gospel to all must be fitting to the understanding that it ***is the wine and not the wine skins that bring salvation.***

This faith is a gift that does not earn us any merit. It is rather the gift of faith in the saving merit of the work of Jesus Christ alone. If we add anything else to faith as a requirement for salvation, we delete the bold message that the Gospel of Christ really has the power to save.

And this is our glorious reformed heritage!