

# **What is the Reformed Faith?**

## **WORKBOOK**

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## **TO BEGIN:**

**Turn the page and read the introduction. Then, turn to Unit 1, Section 1, while listening to the accompanying lecture at:**

**[www.start.urclearning.org](http://www.start.urclearning.org)  
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## INTRODUCTION

A light September rain tapped lightly upon the roof and the stone streets below as the conspirators met just before dawn in a small room in one of their homes, behind locked doors. They listened to Reformed preaching and received the Eucharist according to the Reformed rite, as Roman Catholic officials, having received a tip, slowly closed in with swords drawn. Some of the conspirators fought their way out or dived out windows rather than face capture and the penalty.

The majority, however, was arrested and offered a chance to avoid the cruelest of punishment, simply by recanting their Reformed faith, by apologizing, admitting the errors of that belief, and promising never to participate again. Those who refused, such as the twenty-three year old woman Ms. Luns, were tortured to death at the stake.

The year is 1557 and participating in a Reformed worship service in Paris, France, is a capital offense. Ms. Luns knew what she risked by attending the worship service. Although she was too young to remember it first hand, her family had told her the well-known story of Mr. Berquin, a notable scholar and nobleman first burned at the stake almost thirty years before for refusing to recant his faith.

The situation would only deteriorate. Decades later, the river that ran through Paris literally turned red as thousands of adherents of the Reformed faith were slaughtered in a massacre that began on St. Bartholomew's Day and lasted months, spreading through the country side from city to city and spilling forth from land to land. Ms. Arbaleste darted through the streets, dodging her fellow Reformed men, women and children who were tortured, mutilated, and desecrated along the avenues. When her own family threatened to do the same with her and her infant daughter lest she recant her Reformed faith she refused, screaming that she would rather keep her faith and see her child slaughtered in her arms along with her.

Whatever could have motivated diverse individuals such as Ms. Luns, Mr. Berquin, and Ms. Arbaleste, over the course of the better part of a century in various situations, to all risk literal life and limb rather than recant?

They were driven by deep convictions about something that, perhaps unto this point in your life, you may not have heard about, much less cared about, and that is why we are glad that you have found this series: "What is the Reformed Faith?"

There is a good deal of confusion about the word "Reformed." The word "Reformed" is used with various political and religious movements to describe groups dedicated to changing teaching and practice,

or rather putting it back in accordance with a sacred standard. In this case, the word “Reformed” refers to Christian churches that participated in the Sixteenth-Century “Reformation.”

People commonly describe churches with roots in the “Reformation” as “Protestant,” and Reformed Christians are indeed participants in the Protestant Reformation. But the word “Protestant” technically refers to a small group of “protesters” at a specific meeting in a particular city (Spire, Germany). When people speak of “Protestants,” they often mean Lutherans (groups that follow Martin Luther) or Anglicans or Episcopalians (groups who live or have roots in England). The “Reformed” are another group of Protestants, with millions of member in dozens of countries in Continental Europe and throughout the world.

They called themselves “Reformed,” because the Bible states that Christians continue to sin, corrupting the church over time. Therefore, Christians should continuously “reform” the church, putting it back in accordance with biblical teachings and practice. During the sixteenth century, Roman Catholics chose to stop participating in this process and actually condemned those who attempted such reform. Reformers were forced outside of the Roman Catholic Church and they participated in the Reformation in Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed churches.

The Reformed included John Calvin. Sometimes the

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“Reformed” are called Calvinists, although this was originally a derogatory word used by Roman Catholics, which Calvin himself detested. The Reformed were international but based in countries in Continental Europe, such as France, Germany, and the Netherlands. In the United States, they are often represented by Presbyterians, a later, more minor movement in England, which broke off of the Anglican Church, executed the king, and eventually fled to the American colonies as Puritans. There are differences between the English Presbyterians and the Reformed, some of which are based in their differing statements of belief. Presbyterians use the Westminster Confession, whereas the Reformed use the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of the Council of Dordrecht.

From 1618 to 1619, the Reformed churches from dozens of countries throughout the world sent representatives to meet at the Synod, or Council, of Dordrecht. There, they collectively stated their faith and summarized biblical teachings with three documents, or forms, of unity: the Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, and Canons of Dort.

The United Reformed Churches in North America are descendants of this international Reformed movement and this series explains the biblical teachings as summarized by these three forms of unity.

**Joshua Rosenthal, Ph.D**

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## Unit 1 ~ Why You Should Care About this Question

### Section 1: The Truth About Life

#### Section summary:

The phrase “**the Reformed faith**” means nothing to some people, and it means lots of different things to lots of different people; but for us it is the nickname given to **the truth** about God, us as His creatures, and His world as revealed in the Bible and summarized in the *Ecumenical Creeds* and *The Three Forms of Unity*. Some reasons why people don’t think about **tough religious questions** are understandable, but some other reasons are just lame. Your challenge is to carefully face the big questions of life (this series will help you do that) without becoming **lazy** or **proud and intimidated**.

**Please answer the following questions as you listen through the lecture:**

1. Why are you listening to this series on “What is the Reformed Faith?”? What are your thoughts on “the Reformed faith”? Are you expecting to hear anything in particular?

2. Are you a religious person? Do you fit among the typical “categories” of people mentioned?

3. What are some typical obstacles to people thinking about religious questions?

4. What do we mean when we say that the Reformed faith is “true”?

**Section 2: Can We Know God?**

**Section summary:**

Christian monotheism is true, no matter if people reject Christ for atheism or another false religion.

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This is demonstrated in part by **hopeless internal contradictions** inherent to all competing worldviews. The true God has revealed Himself through nature, but especially through the **Scripture of the Old and New Testaments**. “Christians” sometimes think and act like they do not believe the Bible is God’s Word. What is distinctive about Reformed Christianity is not simply that its rallying cry is *sola scriptura*, but that when the Reformed Christians applied this principle to everyday life, they rightly saw the Scripture teaching them that there are **three non-negotiable marks** of true religion.

**Please answer the following questions as you listen through the lecture:**

1. What does the Bible tell us about the “psychology of unbelief?”
2. What do Reformed Christians believe about the Bible?

3. What is the central reason that we cannot compromise the marks of the true church?

## Unit 2 ~ The Pure Preaching of the Gospel

### Section 1: Sin

#### Section summary:

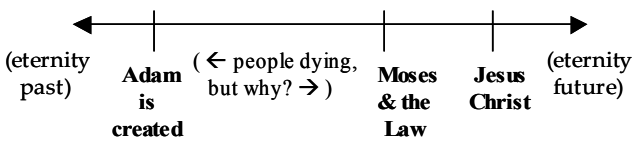
“**Gospel**” means the good news that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. However, without the right understanding of what it means to be a “sinner,” you cannot understand the gospel. God relates to mankind through the **covenant of works**, in which our first father Adam forsook his obligations and rebelled against God. As a result, the human race is **totally depraved**, deserves only **condemnation**, and may come to realize its sorry condition by listening to God’s **law**, which is anything that He commands.

**Please answer the following questions as you listen through the lecture:**

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1. Why is it important that preaching should be clear about sin?

2. What is the covenant of works? What is our spiritual relationship to our first father Adam?



3. What does it mean to be totally depraved?

4. How do you come to know that you are totally depraved?

.....

5. What is God's fair punishment against sinners?

## **Section 2: Justification**

### **Section summary:**

**"Justification"** is God's declaration that a sinner is righteous according to the law. Jesus Christ, by His **active and passive obedience**, fulfills the undone and forsaken obligations of the covenant of works. Sinners are justified on the ground of Christ's work alone as they place **true faith** in Him.

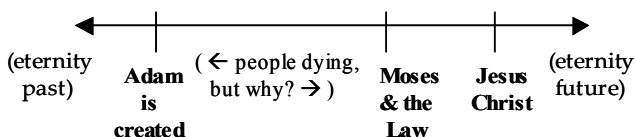
**Please answer the following questions as you listen through the lecture:**

1. Did the terms of the covenant of works change after mankind fell in Adam?

2. What are the "active" and "passive" aspects of Christ's justifying work?

3. What does “propitiation” mean?

4. How is Adam a “type” of Jesus Christ who came after him? On what basis will God reward anyone with eternal peace and happiness?



5. What are the three “parts” of true faith? What is the “gospel promise”?

6. What role do our good works play in our justification?

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### Section 3: Predestination

#### Section summary:

The reason why people have true faith in Jesus Christ is because God lovingly, graciously, and justly **predestined** them to have it. The acronym “**T.U.L.I.P.**” is handy for remembering how God saves His elect people. Its teachings are clear, simple, and humbling, though ultimately incomprehensible and sometimes difficult to accept.

**Please answer the following questions as you listen through the lecture:**

1. Fill in the acronym “T.U.L.I.P.,” and note some of the significant Bible passages that teach these truths:

T \_\_\_\_\_

U \_\_\_\_\_

L \_\_\_\_\_

I \_\_\_\_\_

P \_\_\_\_\_

.....



2. Does this teaching turn people into robots, or entice those who think they are elect to sin all the more, or thwart our evangelistic zeal?

## **Section 4: Preaching**

### **Section summary:**

**Preaching** is the proclamation of Christ's redemptive work by His ordained ambassadors. Though many Christians may speak about Christ, only preachers preach. Preaching is a **means of grace**, and while hearing it we confidently expect the Holy Spirit to work in our lives through it.

**Please answer the following questions as you listen through the lecture:**

1. What are the links in the golden evangelistic chain of Romans 10:12-17?

2. What are some other passages that tell us preaching is a special, Spirit-filled means of grace?

3. Read this definition of preaching taken from the *Second Helvetic Confession*, written by Henrich Bullinger, a 16<sup>th</sup>-century Swiss pastor and theologian:

“The preaching of the word of God is the word of God. Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful; and that neither any other Word of God is to be invented nor is to be expected from heaven: and that now the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; for even if he be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God remains still true and good.”

- What are some ways in which or places where people today may be tempted to expect God to speak aside from the God-ordained means of grace?

## Unit 3 ~ The Legitimate Administration of the Sacraments

### Section 1: Baptism

#### Section summary:

The **sacraments** are constantly attacked by the ignorance, apathy, and pollution of modern churches. Yet their importance cannot enough be emphasized, as God gives us the **things signified with the signs**. Baptism is properly administered to professing believers and their children in the presence of God's people by a minister lawfully called.

**Please answer the following questions as you listen through the lecture:**

1. What is a good working definition of a "sacrament"? How do we know that the Bible teaches that there are only two of them?

2. What are the two parts to every sacrament? What is the relationship between the two?

3. What is the relationship between the time of baptism and the actual washing away of sins for those who receive it? Does everyone who receives water baptism also receive the actual forgiveness of sins?

4. Who are the proper recipients of Christian baptism?

5. Who should be doing the baptizing?

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6. How is Christ “preaching” to the whole church when baptism is administered?

## **Section 2: The Lord’s Supper**

### **Section summary:**

The Lord’s Supper, or Holy Communion, is far more than a **memorial service**, and is a sacrament through which our **mystical union** with Christ is intensified. The Roman Catholic and Baptist/broader evangelical views of this sacrament are especially repugnant to the Scripture.

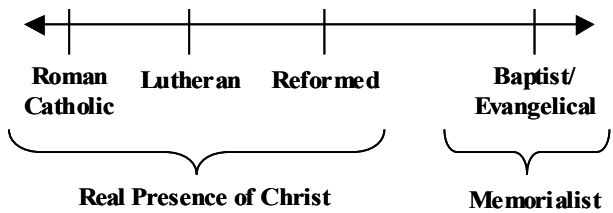
**Please answer the following questions as you listen through the lecture:**

1. What are the signs, and what are the things signified, in the Lord’s Supper?

2. Where is the mystical union with Christ taught us in the Scripture?

3. What is the most clear text indicating that the Lord's Supper is an intensification of our mystical union with Christ?

4. Note the differing views across this "Lord's Supper doctrinal spectrum":



5. Why are the Roman Catholic and Baptist/broader evangelical views of the Lord's Supper so especially repugnant to the Scripture?

6. Why do the elders in Reformed churches "fence" the Lord's table?

## Unit 4 ~ The Proper Exercise of Church Discipline

### Section 1: Precursor #1, Church Membership

#### Section summary:

Christ instituted **church discipline** for His glory and our benefit. It is impossible to properly exercise church discipline without official **church**

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**membership**; in fact, the Bible teaches us that the apostles established official, **visible churches** as local, **mixed** expressions of the **invisible church**. John Calvin, a 16<sup>th</sup>-century Genevan pastor and theologian rightly said, "those to whom he is a Father, the Church must also be a mother," echoing these words of early church father Cyprian: "He can no longer have God for his Father who has not the Church for his mother."

**Please answer the following questions as you listen through the lecture:**

1. What are the reasons Christ instituted church discipline?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. How does the Bible show us that Christians ought to be members of local churches?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What is the difference between the invisible church and the mixed, visible church?



## Section 2: Precursor #2, Church Government

### Section summary:

Jesus wants His local churches to have a particular governmental structure. There are three **offices** in the church: **minister of the Word**, **elder**, and **deacon**. The minister(s) of the Word and the elder(s) form the **Consistory**, while the Consistory meeting together with the deacons forms the **Council**.

**Please answer the following questions as you listen through the lecture:**

1. What is a church “office, and what are the three offices in Christ’s church”? Where does the Bible teach us that the minister of the Word is a distinct office from that of the elder?
2. What are the duties of the minister of the Word?

3. What are the duties of the elders?

4. What are the duties of the deacons?

5. What is the relationship of the local Consistory to the broader assemblies?

### **Section 3: The Church Discipline Process**

#### **Section summary:**

Christ instituted the **process of church discipline** in Matthew 18 in order to protect the accused and the church from tyranny or anarchy. Here we examine how the **Church Order** of the United Reformed

Churches in North America applies Christ's process to the life of the churches.

**Please read through the church discipline process as applied in the United Reformed Churches in North America:**

1. Here are the basic steps of church discipline according to Matthew 18 applied in the URCNA:

**Article 52-** In case anyone errs in doctrine or offends in conduct, as long as the sin is of a private character and does not give public offense, the rule clearly prescribed by Christ in Matthew 18 shall be followed.

**Article 53-** Secret sins from which the sinner repents after being admonished by one person in private or in the presence of two or three witnesses, shall not be made known to the Consistory.

**Article 54-** If anyone has been admonished in love by two or three persons concerning a secret sin and does not repent, or if he has committed a public sin, the matter shall be brought to the Consistory.

**Article 55-** Anyone whose sin is properly made known to the Consistory, and who then obstinately rejects the Scriptural admonitions of the Consistory, shall be suspended from all privileges of church membership, including the use of the sacraments. After such suspension and subsequent admonitions, and before proceeding to excommunication, the impenitence of the sinner

shall be publicly made known to the congregation, the offense explained, together with the care bestowed upon him and repeated admonitions, so that the congregation may speak to him and pray for him. This shall be done in three steps. In the first, the name of the sinner need not be mentioned, that he be somewhat spared. In the second, the Consistory shall seek the advice of classis before proceeding, whereupon his name shall be mentioned. In the third, the congregation shall be informed that, unless he repents, he will be excluded from the fellowship of the church, so that his excommunication, if he remains impenitent, may take place with the full knowledge of the church. The interval between the steps shall be left to the discretion of the Consistory.

**Article 56-** If these steps of discipline, having been carried out in a loving manner, do not bring about repentance, but rather harden the sinner in his ways, the Consistory shall proceed to the extreme remedy, namely, excommunication, in agreement with the Word of God and with the use of the appropriate liturgical form.

**Article 57-** The restoration of a sinner whose sins are public, or have become public because the admonition of the church was despised, shall take place upon sufficient evidence of repentance, in such manner as the Consistory shall deem conducive to the edification of the church. Whether in particular cases this should take place in public shall, when there is a difference of opinion about it within the Consistory, be decided with the advice of two neighboring churches of the classis.

**Article 58-** Whenever anyone who has been excommunicated desires to become reconciled to the church by way of penitence, it shall be announced to the congregation in order that, insofar as no one can allege anything against him to the contrary, he may, with profession of his repentance, be publicly reinstated with the use of the appropriate liturgical form.

## Unit 5 ~ The Church and its Confessions

### Section 1: What it Means to be a Confessional Church

#### Section summary:

Most people who say they are Christians say they believe what the Bible teaches. **Confessions** make clear not only what we believe the Bible teaches, but also what we agree to agree on as church members. Our church members **subscribe** to the **ecumenical creeds** and the **Three Forms of Unity**, which although are not God's Word, are **faithful summaries** of that Word.

**Please answer the following questions as you listen through the lecture:**

1. What is a creed? What is a confession? What is a catechism? What are canons? Which ones state the faith of the Reformed churches? What is their relationship to the Bible?
2. What function do these confessions have in our churches?
3. What are some examples of things that are not “confessional” and therefore not binding on our members?

**Section 2: Reformed Worship**

**Section summary:**

The Reformed confessions demand a distinctive, biblical approach to **public worship**. Following the **regulative principle**, Reformed worship is **God-**

**centered, dialogical**, and its content is ordered by the **elements** prescribed in the Word of God.

**Please answer the following questions as you listen through the lecture:**

1. What is the regulative principle of public worship? What is a liturgy, and what are the prescribed elements of worship?
2. What are some implications of our understanding that worship is to be God-centered?
3. What do we mean when we say that public worship is dialogical?

### **Section 3: Other Confessional Implications**

#### **Section summary:**

The Reformed confessions demand a distinctive, biblical approach to our **churchly obligations**. These obligations are well represented in Heidelberg Catechism Q & A #103:

Q: What does God require in the fourth Commandment, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy . . .”?

A: In the first place, God wills that the ministry of the Gospel and schools be maintained, and that I, especially on the day of rest, diligently attend church to learn the Word of God, to use the Holy Sacraments, to call publicly upon the Lord, and to give Christian alms. In the second place, that all the days of my life I rest from my evil works, allow the Lord to work in me by His Spirit, and thus begin in this life the everlasting Sabbath.

**Please answer the following questions as you listen through the lecture:**



1. What are the three categories of obligations that we have listed in Q & A #103?

2. What should be distinctive about, Reformed evangelism, church-planting, and missions?

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTHER READING

Louis Berkhof. *Manual of Christian Doctrine*.  
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979

For years this book served as basic curriculum for high schoolers. The small book covers various aspects of the faith in a systematic fashion and included Bible verses and study questions. This is an excellent place to begin an exploration of the Reformed faith. For individuals searching for a smaller introduction, see Berkhof's *Summary of Chistian Doctrine*.

John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.  
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1845.

This book originally served as a handbook for pastors, a sort of theological Swiss Army knife that allowed them to address various topics in congregations as they arose. The translation by Henry Beveridge is not only less expensive than others renditions, it is also better.

Euan Cameron. *The European Reformation*.  
Oxford: Oxford, 1991.

For those interested in knowing more about the history of the Reformation, this book covers a wide sweep of movements during the period. It also summarizes scholarship on the most important topics, exploding mythology about the era and its personalities.

Petrus Dethenus. *The Pearl of Christian Comfort*.  
Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 1997.

An easy read, written by a Flemish reformer. The book is a conversation between a woman and a reformer, covering numerous subjects in a classic “dialog” format.

William Hendriksen. *More than Conquerors*.  
Grand Rapids: Baker, 1940.

A classic explanation of the Biblical book of Revelation that places the reader in midst of God’s action in holy history.