

Worship Service: 10am, 160 Paya Lebar Road, Orion@Paya Lebar #04-06, Singapore 409022
Sunday School: 11.45am, Prayer Meeting: 8pm Wednesday
Pastor Jack Sin at 91160948 and jacksin710@gmail.com
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Lessons from the 400th Anniversary of The Synod of Dort & The Reformed Faith

Introduction

For this year of our church's 16th century Reformation commemoration, we will turn our attention to the often neglected 17th century Dutch Reformation instead. The year 1619 was a significant year as the Reformed theologians of Netherlands and Europe put together a doctrinal statement that has been used as the standard of Reformed orthodoxy ever since. This



year marks the 400th year of that historic occasion and we need to be cognizant of it. We ought never to forget church history as it gives us moorings, bearings and spiritual direction and insight. It is also a great aid against the potential errors and falsehood of our times.

The prophet Jeremiah 6:16 says,

'Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, we will not walk therein.'

We need to return and know the historical moorings of our Protestant faith.

The Reformed faith has its theological roots in the Bible and its historic roots in the 16th century Protestant Reformation and the Dutch Reformation.



The historic Synod of Dort also defined, disseminated and defended sound doctrine in the time of controversy. Men like Martin Luther of Germany, John Calvin of France and his successor Theodore Beza, William Tyndale (who translated the Bible into English) of the UK, Thomas Cranmer (the first Protestant Archbishop of Canterbury), Ulrich Zwingli of

Switzerland and John Knox (who revived and transformed Scotland), believed the church of their time had strayed from the historical truths found in the Bible during the medieval ages. These men and others led a movement to reform the church at the end of the Middle Ages, which ultimately led to a departure from the Roman Church. Hence, the name 'Protestants' stuck with us until today.

There is a branch of the 16th century Reformation whose doctrines were particularly associated with John Calvin, John Knox, the English Puritans, the French Huguenots and the Scottish Covenanters known as Reformed Theology or the Reformed Faith.



Robert Johnson has noted correctly that

“Calvin is not the only Reformed theologian: Zwingli (who died four years before Calvin joined the Reformed faith), Bullinger, Wolfgang Capito, Zacharias Ursinus, Johannes Oecolampadius, Caspar Hedio, Martin Bucer, and Peter Martyr Vermigli all left theological and occasional writings and liturgies, and the list could go on. Calvin is sometimes made to be the exemplar of Reformed theology, but Reformed theology is, by no means, limited to him. So, rather than tracing Reformed theology to Calvin as the sole source, Reformed theology is better imagined as a river into which many sources flow and from which many streams originate”.

He added that not all Reformed groups sprang from the Reformation era. In Italy, the Waldensians led by Peter Waldo, a Christian group with roots in the 12th century, opposed the excesses of the medieval Roman Church and taught a simple gospel of poverty, modesty, sobriety and evangelical fervour, rejecting Roman Catholic doctrines for which they could find no scriptural warrant (such as purgatory or granting of indulgences). After contact with Bohemian Hussites, they eventually became part of the Reformation, deciding to adopt the Swiss Reformed movement's theological orientation. This ancient group is still active today, with its major concentration still in Italy.

(see <http://reformedtheology.org/SiteFiles/WhatIsRT.html>).

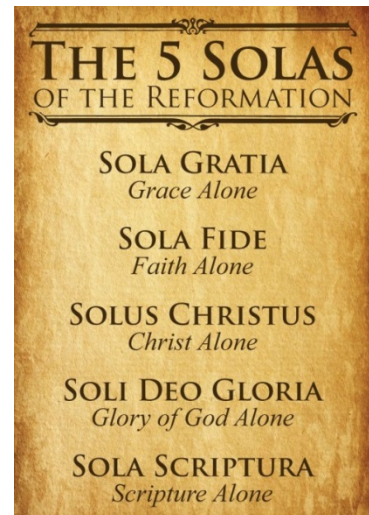
According to Wikipedia, a 2011 report of the Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, estimated that members of Presbyterian or Reformed churches make up 7% of the 801 million Protestants globally, or approximately 56 million people. This is of course a minority compared to the statistics of Christianity worldwide.

It is noteworthy that Reformed Christians have many basic Christian doctrines in common with non-reformed Christians. This generally includes doctrines such as the Trinity, that Jesus Christ was both fully God and fully man, that it was necessary for Jesus to die to pay for man's sin, that the Bible is inspired by God, and that Christ will return again at the second coming. There is, however, something different about Reformed theology which is noteworthy below.

The Bible & the Doctrine of the Sovereignty of God

There are unnegotiable tenets on which Reformed theology is based.

First, the Reformers said that the inspired and sufficient Bible alone is the ultimate and final authority in matters of faith and practice. This means that the Bible is to be used as the final authority over all things - including the family and church. Because the Reformers believed the Bible is the authoritative, infallible, sufficient and perspicuous Word of God, all the opinions of men, the church and society were to be conformed to the Bible. This was known as ***Sola Scriptura*** (i.e. the Roman Catholic teachings and that of some of the liberal churches need to be examined in the light of scripture).



Once the Bible was established as the only rule of faith and life, the Reformers emphasised the important doctrine of salvation. The Reformed view of salvation says that sinful men whom the Sovereign God has elected can only be declared righteous (or justified) by God through the satisfaction of sin by a perfect substitute - namely Jesus Christ who died for them only, although this atoning death is potentially able to save all men. Only Christ could pay the price for the sin of man in a way that God could declare man "not guilty" or "justified" in His sight.

Man is so totally depraved that NO man can save himself except through Christ's substitutionary sacrifice as his own. The Reformers found that the Bible taught that man's justification is completely an act of God's free and sovereign grace. Sinful man has no part whatsoever in God's justifying work (Rom 3:25). It is by God's sovereign grace alone. If man could contribute to his salvation and hence to God's work, then his grace would no longer be grace. Calvinists believe that redemption is the sole work of

God; God alone can transform the fallen hearts of sinners from rebellion to faith and obedience and repentance of sins. This tenet of the Reformed faith is known as ***Sola Gratia***.

How then does sinful man become a recipient of God's grace? The Bible teaches that salvation is by grace through faith alone and by Christ alone (Rom 1:17) and not by good works or rituals or man's morality. God's grace is extended to those who believe, or rather those who have faith. But what is it that the believer has faith in, and how does one acquire that faith? God declares the sinner "not guilty" when he believes the promise of God in the Bible and looks to Christ alone as the one who paid the price for his sin. Faith, then, is the means whereby the sinner receives Christ. The Reformers taught that faith itself is also a gift of God which leads men to repentance of sins. This tenet is known as ***Sola Fide*** and is one of the five pillars of the Protestant Reformation.

Finally, all the magisterial Reformers believed that the Bible teaches that salvation rests completely on the finished work of Christ at the Cross. There is nothing that depraved sinful man can do to contribute to his salvation; it is God who effectually calls him and he will respond as the Lord wills (Jn 10:27). Christ's righteousness is credited to the sinner; he does not deserve that righteousness, he has nothing to do with that righteousness, but it is imputed to him according to God's grace. This tenet of the Reformed faith is known as ***Solus Christos***.

The Reformers also strongly believed that all glory should be to God alone and not man. The chief end of man is "to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever". Hence the last sola is ***Soli Deo Gloria***, which is also a mark of the reformers. We need this reminder today in a man centered world rather than Christ centered.

These tenets of the Reformed faith have been embodied in a system of doctrine that can be summarized as ***TULIP*** given below.

The Place of History behind TULIP

This year is the 400th anniversary of the Synod of Dort which took place in 1619. Reformed theology stresses the work of God's sovereign grace with the succinct summary of the five basic points often referred to as the five points of Calvinism, with the acrostic TULIP but are we aware of the historical and theological reasons behind it?

This was written during the Synod of Dort from Nov 1618 - May 1619 by the Dutch and European theologians in response to the 14 Remonstrants led by Simon Episcopius. The proponents of the Jacob Arminian doctrinal position first put forward the 5 points of Arminianism, submitting it in objection to Calvin's biblical understanding of soteriology or the doctrine of salvation.



Arminianism is a theological system that emphasized man's free will in salvation, rejecting the Calvinistic doctrines, which emphasized God's sovereignty in salvation.

The Synod of Dort was to bring resolution to this theological conflict. Representatives of the Reformed church from eight foreign countries were invited to the synod, and church leaders from Great Britain, Germany, and Switzerland attended. The Canons of Dort was the reply after almost 6-and-a-half months of deliberations by 102 participants with 27 of them outside the Dutch provinces, including some from Scotland and the UK. The Arminians presented a list of reasons why Calvinism was wrong to gain support for their side. The Calvinists, led by Franciscus Gomarus argued that the Remonstrants departed from the Bible, and that they could not justify their beliefs using Scripture. The Arminians disagreed and later withdrew from the Synod proceedings. The pastors of the Reformed church came together and examined the five points put forward by the Arminians, compared them to Scripture, and found them to be lacking in truth. Exposing the lack of scriptural truth for the theological stand of Arminius, the Synod of Dort unanimously rejected Arminianism.

The Synod of Dort went further than just taking a stand against Arminianism; the delegates drafted their own five points to summarize sound biblical Calvinistic doctrines, and the Canons of Dort published for the first time the Five Points of Calvinism. The Synod of Dort also discussed and completed the drafting of the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism and later the translation of the Dutch Bible. The Synod not only outlined what it believed to be right but also rejected that which was wrong and banished 14 of the Remonstrants. These doctrines of God's sovereign grace are given below in a terse form.

Basically, Calvinism is known by an acronym: **T.U.L.I.P.**

Total Depravity (also known as Total Inability and Original Sin)

Unconditional Election

Limited Atonement (also known as Particular Atonement)

Irresistible Grace

Perseverance of the Saints (also known as Once Saved Always Saved)

These five categories do not comprise Calvinism in totality. They simply represent some of its main points. Here is some elaboration of each point.

- Man is totally depraved. This means that all humans are so tainted by the effects of sin since the Fall of man in the Garden of Eden that every area of thought and action is affected. Our sinfulness is so complete that no one can truly seek to know God or God's ways unless God works within us to lead us to do so (Gen 6:5; Rom 3:10-12). There is no goodness in man at all that will please God.
- Because man is unable to know God unless he works within us, it is only by God's grace that we can be transformed or "regenerated." God must do a work of grace in a person's heart in order for them to have faith

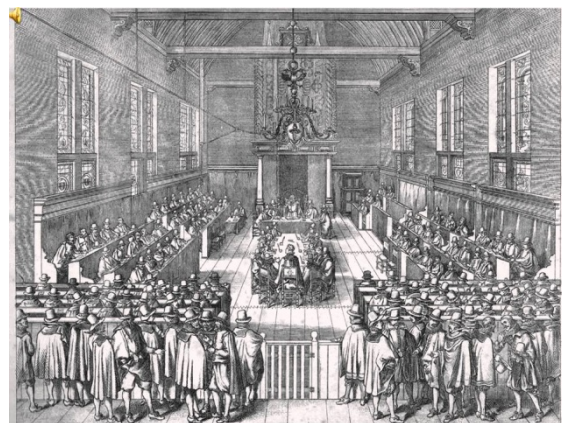
in Christ. Since not all people put their faith in Christ, this means that God elects to work in some people and not in others. This electing work is not done in some people because God finds some good redeeming quality in them. God's electing work in man is totally "unconditional" (Eph 1:4, Jn 15:16).

- Since God does not call nor save everyone, that raises the question, "Did Christ die for everyone?" The Reformers believed the Bible teaches that while the value of Christ's death is infinite (it was sufficient for all), Christ died specifically for those God wants to save (it was efficient only for the elect as said by Augustine). This is often called particular redemption in His design or "limited atonement" in its intent and extent (Mt 1:21, Eph 5:26), but note that the death of Christ is of unlimited value.
- As totally depraved, man is resistant to the things of God. The Bible teaches that "Men love darkness rather than light." However, when God does a work of grace in a man's heart, that which was once undesirable now becomes highly desirable and God will achieve His purpose in the end. The heart of man is changed and God becomes irresistible to Him. We call this "irresistible grace" or effectual calling (Jn 10:11).
- Finally, the Reformers believed the Bible teaches that when God does a work of grace in sinful man, He will not forsake them and will also carry it through to the end. He preserves us in our faith and prevents us from a full and final falling away from Him. There is eternal security for the elect (Jude 23-24, Jn 10:26-27). **A truly regenerate person will never lose his or her salvation.**

(See David N. Steele & Curtis C. Thomas, Calvinism Defined, Defended Documented, RP Publishing, 1963).

The Effects of the Synod

The 13 Remonstrant ministers, including Simon Episcopius, had been charged to remain in Dort until further instruction. On 20 May 1619, the Remonstrant ministers who had been present were summoned by the lay-commissioners of the Synod and directed to abstain from ministerial activities such as preaching, exhorting, administering the sacraments and visiting the sick.



Furthermore, Episcopius was commanded not to write letters or books promoting the doctrines of the Remonstrants. The Remonstrants agreed to refrain from ministering in the government-ordained churches but confessed their duty to expound their doctrines wherever people would assemble to hear them. On 5 July, they were called to the States-General Assembly and when they refused to sign *The Act of Cessation*, the legalization of the order to desist from the ministry, they were ordered to leave the United Provinces (*edited from Wikipedia*).

There were serious consequences to those who opposed the Canons of Dort and the aftermath of the Synod of Dort was less than ideal. Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, the leader of the Arminians was beheaded as a traitor to the state, and the Arminians were ordered to sign the Act of Cessation, which was supposed to be an agreement to stop propagating their teachings. They refused to sign it, and were hence labelled “disturbers of the peace,” and they were ejected from their homeland. Van Oldenbarnevelt’s sons then attempted to assassinate Prince Maurice, but they failed. In 1625, after the death of Maurice, the Arminians were allowed to return to the Netherlands, and they established churches and schools throughout the country and later in the UK in the Anglican and Methodist churches. The Synod of Dort remains one of the most influential church councils of history, underscoring the principles of the Reformed faith which is still adhered to today by many Presbyterian and Reformed churches.

(edited from <https://www.gotquestions.org/Synod-of-Dort.html>)

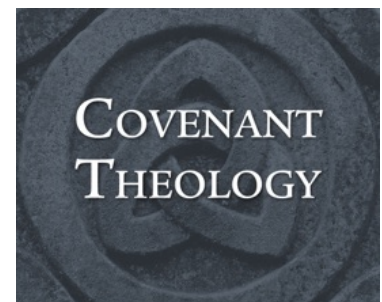
The Relevance and Importance of Covenant Theology

These doctrines of the Reformed faith help "Reformed" churches to guide them in their church life and teaching ministry and to live by them. Reformed theology teaches that we are called to be separate from the world (Rom 12:1-2). We are responsible to work to reform all of God's creation for the sake of Jesus Christ. This means that we desire to preach the "good news" of Jesus Christ to a sinful world that God might glorify Christ by turning chosen men from their sinful ways.

The theology of the Reformed church is also "Covenantal" (i.e. as opposed to dispensational)

Richard Pratt said that

“Covenant theology refers to one of the basic beliefs that Calvinists have held about the Bible. All Protestants who have remained faithful to their heritage affirm Sola Scriptura, the belief that the Bible is our supreme and unquestionable authority. Covenant theology, however, distinguishes the Reformed view of Scripture from other Protestant outlooks by emphasizing that divine covenants unify the teachings of the entire Bible.”



Many of these have been expressed in historic creeds, catechisms and confessions from the Westminster Confession, the *Three Forms of Unity* which is a collective name for the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, the Heidelberg Catechism, and even the London Baptist Confession of 1689 and others.

Covenant theology is a biblical system which says that God created man to live in eternal, complete communion with Him upon the condition of perfect obedience followed by the covenant of grace. This covenant of

works forbade man to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil that would result in the pain of death. When man disobeyed God, in His mercy, He had entered into a covenant of grace to bring man into an estate of salvation through Christ the redeemer. This covenant of grace is at work throughout history and can be seen in God's gracious dealings with man from the time of Adam (i.e. after the Fall of man and original sin).

This covenant of grace that points to Christ is relevant to all of us today. Just as Abraham's children were to receive circumcision as the sign of the covenant, children today receive the sign and seal of baptism as their inclusion in this covenant. However, just as Abraham's descendants were saved through faith (not circumcision) by embracing the promises of God, the children of covenant families are saved by faith alone and not by baptism. They ought to be set apart for God in anticipation of their faith in Christ, that they may be redeemed by grace through personal faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour, as the Lord wills. Until the day children profess their personal faith in Christ, baptism (like circumcision) is an outward sign of the special standing they have in the covenant community (1 Cor 7:14).

Conclusion

History that is forgotten is often repeated. Today, we need to humbly learn and to soberly remember the past, meaningfully. There is dire need to continue steadfastly in the true spirit and substance of the Reformation. Reformed and Bible Presbyterian churches whose doctrinal stand is represented by the Westminster Confession of Faith and its standards (1643-47) have continued in this tradition to teach sound Reformed doctrines and practices. We pray for a fresh spiritual awakening or revival in Singapore and Asia as it was in Germany, Switzerland, the UK, Netherlands and other parts of Europe in the 16-17th century, to the saving of souls. We should persevere in the spirit and stand of the Protestant Reformation and in the doctrines of grace. It is our fervent prayer that God will raise up Bible believing and defending preachers and churches committed to the propagation of the pure gospel and the proper contention for the precious faith against spiritual falsehood, religious compromise and diabolical deception in these last perilous days (Jude 3, 4).

Jack Sin

Works consulted include:

David N. Steele & Curtis C. Thomas, Calvinism Defined, Defended, Documented, RP Publishing, 1963.

Robert Raymond, A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith, 430-456, James Good, Famous Reformers of the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches, 2009

Gary Johnson and Fowler White, Whatever Happened to the Reformation?, PR Publishing, 2001.

http://www.nccopc.org/reformed_theology.html

<http://reformedtheology.org/SiteFiles/WhatIsRT.html>

<https://www.gotquestions.org/Synod-of-Dort.html>

Madam Leow Sook Ching's Confession of Faith

To my beloved husband, son and daughter-in-law, daughters, grandchildren and spouses, great grandchildren, relatives and friends:

I wish you to know that I confess with all joy that Jesus Christ is my Saviour and Lord, who has paid the ransom for my sin by His blood on the cross of Calvary. Now, I am forever with the Lord which is far better (Philippians 1:23). "For if we be dead with Him, we shall also live with Him" (2 Timothy 2:11). For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out (1 Timothy 6:7)

My beloved husband and children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, I want you to be strong in the grace that is in Christ (2 Timothy 2:1) and not in your strength alone. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life whereunto thou art also called and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses (1 Timothy 6:12)

Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice (Philippians 4:4). My God shall supply your every need according to His riches in Glory in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19) and the very God of peace sanctify you wholly and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful and He will do it (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24)

Farewell, my beloved and my fellow believers, we shall meet in heaven one day and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Amen.

"The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."

Job 1:21

(NB.Mdm Leow went home to the Lord on 17 oct and she was the wife of Eld Joshua Lim, one of the founding leaders of the BP movement who was instrumental in the drafting of our BP constitution)



Thank God for a fruitful kite flying session where Dinesh's father Rajan and his sister came along and pray for their salvation



Our ushers and our new church signage at the entrance of the church

Memory Verse

1 Thes 3:13 To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.

Announcements

1. Rev Jack Sin speaks next Sunday on "Sanctification Practiced" (1 Thes 4:1-12)
2. Weekly Prayer meeting will be held on Wednesday 8pm at the home of sis Han Kin Kheng
3. There will be NBC this coming Friday at 7.30pm in church studying the book of 1 Samuel 26.