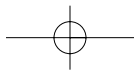
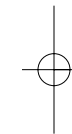
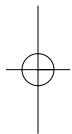


P A R T



# FOUNDATIONS AND HISTORY





## SALVATION BELONGS TO THE LORD



### *Our Greatest Good*

The purpose of this first part is twofold: first, to explain the foundational idea of reformation, and second, to explore the historical manifestations of the Reformed outlook. Readers are free to go directly to the second and third parts, which set forth the basics of Reformed theology in a direct fashion. However, they would be missing something important. History is the arena for the display of the principles we are discussing. Having some idea of the place of the Reformed faith in the world enables us to appreciate and evaluate it with much better perspective.

Theology (from *Theo-logos*) means words about God and his truth. Why should we worry about words about God, especially words in human language? Is not all theology abstract and theological enterprise antiquated? Do the formulations of religious principles matter? Why should it make any difference which system of theology, if any, has it right?

One fundamental reason goes to the heart of God's relation to his people. First and foremost, God is honored by the way we speak about him. A dim analogy might be the way we are pleased when someone speaks well of us. Second, good theology means we understand

who God is and what his view of the world is, because the claim of theology is that it comes from God, from his revelation to us. Good theology is what the New Testament calls a “stewardship from God that is by faith” rather than “speculations” (1 Tim. 1:4). Sound words are health-giving for us as well. Our words about God put us in right relationship to God. In this way, good theology is restorative.

The Bible affirms this in a thousand ways. For example, telling his people to return to him, the Lord, through the prophet Jeremiah, connects restoration to precious words: “If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth” (Jer. 15:19). In another example, the apostle Paul exhorts his young student Timothy to “follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 1:13). Notice how trusting and loving the Lord is inseparable from sound words (literally, wholesome words). Speaking rightly about God and his world, which is what theology really means, is not a luxury. It issues from communion with God and brings health to our souls. It goes to the heart of who we are and nurtures our greatest good.

Reformed theology aims at nothing less than recounting the way things are. From the creation, to the fall of humankind, to the new creation in Christ, the story told by good theology is the right account of reality. It is at once sobering, convicting, and life-giving. Good theology speaks to the human person in order to diagnose his or her condition and call that person to be reconciled with God.

Human beings are creatures, rooted in the earth. Our feet are planted in the soil. As creatures, we share much with the animal world: we breathe, we see and smell, we reproduce, we hunger and thirst. At the same time, we are profoundly different from anything else in the world. Human beings need meaning. We need transcendence. We are made to commune with a higher being. When these are denied, alienation and aimlessness come to characterize us. Sometimes this is conscious, taking the form of a quest for meaning and value. Sometimes it is unconscious, in which case either we may be satisfied, more or less, with the way things are, with family and work and pleasures, or we may be despondent and depressed about the way things are. In any

case, it is profoundly characteristic of human beings that we experience the desire for meaning and the frustration of that desire.

The great North African bishop Aurelius Augustine (354–430) begins his masterpiece of meditative theology, the *Confessions*, with the thought that our human instinct is to praise God. Despite the sad effects of the fall on the human creature, he still has that insistent, clamant desire to praise God: “You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you,” Augustine tells us.<sup>1</sup> Our desire to praise God is so deeply ingrained that it has led some skeptics to assert that all belief in a deity is merely a projection of our needs, the translation of human aspirations into the image of a heavenly father. Undoubtedly such wishful thinking is often involved in matters of religion. But Augustine adds a qualifier, the needed corrective to thinking religion might succeed as human projection. To complete the phrase, he says, “He bears about him the mark of death, the sign of his own sin, to remind him that you would ‘thwart the proud.’ ” With him, then we realize that though we need to find God, there can be no successful humanistic construction that will arrive at the truth unaided.

The dark Book of Ecclesiastes puts it realistically: “[God] has made everything beautiful [appropriate] in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (Eccl. 3:11). Our search for meaning, the *desiderium aeternitatis*, is given to us by God, but our limitations and the vanity of the world in which we live prevent us from finding that meaning in any satisfactory manner. Thus, the author concludes, “However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out” (Eccl. 8:17).

The hunger for God takes many forms in our present world. It may be in the vague, New Age quest for spiritual reality. It may be in the fanatic guise of revolution or terror. In the West, we are discovering that all of our prosperity, all of the technology at our disposal, the

1. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1.1.

travel, the communication, our extraordinary freedoms, all of these are as of nothing compared with happiness and a contented life. Yet we cannot seem to find them. Something has gone wrong. Things are not as they are meant to be.

This same double-edged truth is put in tragic terms by the apostle John in the prologue to his Gospel: “[The one true light] was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him” (John 1:10). Jesus Christ was the one through whom the creation came into being. His imprint is found on every part of it. There is not one realm of the physical world or of social life of which he was not a definitive interpreter, because he framed the universe. Yet the world did not know him. The text goes on to say he came to his own people, the people of Israel, and even they did not receive him (John 1:11). Stark words. Stark contrast.

But things do not end here. Hopeless in itself as our restless search may be, there is yet hope. This same God whom to know is life and joy, this same God who cannot be discovered by merely human religion, has made himself known in spite of it all. He has given his creatures the power to know him as a free and unconditional act of love. And so, John goes on: “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12–13). We can receive God, we can know him, because he changes us profoundly. We are “born of God,” that is, we become his children by the supernatural operation of his Spirit (see John 3:3, 5). Precisely because Jesus has come into the world, not only as the one true light but also as the Word made flesh, born himself to die and then to be raised from the dead, renewal of the most revolutionary kind has been effected. Christ loved his own, he “loved them to the end,” by making them completely clean (John 13:1, 10). Christ, the “firstborn of all creation,” and the “firstborn from the dead,” is able to reconcile all things to himself and to translate all God’s children from the kingdom of darkness to his own kingdom, filled with his real brothers and sisters (Col. 1:13–20).

The Reformed faith seeks to do full justice to these two sides of the quest for meaning. It knells the sober sound of humanity’s

spiritual death, its incapacity to lift itself up and bring meaning to life on its own. The Reformed diagnosis of the human condition is beyond pessimism, though more ultimately hopeful than any kind of optimism. The creation itself is made futile, placed under a bondage, and we are buried in its depths, as “flesh” that is hostile to God (Rom. 8:7, 20–21). But then the power of God’s love is the power of resurrection, which triumphs over all this weakness. Having been slaves to sin, because of Christ’s resurrection we can now be empowered by goodness, so that sin can no longer have dominion over us (Rom. 6). Not only God’s people but also the entire creation is being saved, and one day there will be a new heaven and a new earth where everything in this tired, miserable world will pass away and be no more (Rev. 21:1).

Whatever else may be good, the world, family, culture, friends, the arts, all that human life possesses that has worth, our highest good is not in these things but in knowing God and being known by him. Any theology that impoverishes this calling, either by injecting false optimism into the assessment of our condition or by minimizing the power of God’s love, is ultimately a poor rendering of the way things are. Any theology that gets the balance wrong, either by making God all too human or by making humanity all too divine, is short of the mark. And so, we can begin to see how critical it is to get it right.

The apostle Paul warns the Colossians against the delusions of “plausible arguments,” because they remove from “the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:2–4). Good theology, then, is based on God’s revelation. It wants to find wisdom and knowledge in Christ, not human groping. Reformed theology wants to recognize the full authority of its source, and then say it right.

### ***Mere Reformed Faith***

So, what is Reformed theology? What does it mean to adhere to the Reformed faith? Is there one all-encompassing summary of the

Reformed outlook? To make such a claim runs the danger of paring everything down to an abstraction and forgetting the riches and depth of our faith. Still, part of the task of ordering our theological ideas is to assign a center and then move toward the periphery. Think of a wheel, with its hub, and then the spokes, and finally the rim, which connects to the ground. Put in that way, we can venture a statement or two. There truly is a center to Reformed theology. The Bible proclaims a hub, from which the rest of the wheel is defined. It would be hard to say it better than the final words of Psalm 3:

Salvation belongs to the LORD;  
your blessing be on your people! (Ps. 3:8)

David no doubt made this statement at the end of a prayer when fleeing from his son Absalom, who had tragically turned against his father and become a political rival (see 2 Sam. 15:14–17). In his appeal, he also complains of the taunts of his many adversaries, who tell him God is not going to save him. We ought to understand salvation to mean, first of all, a rescue from enemies. But putting this in context and looking at its full meaning, salvation has to be understood as far more than deliverance. It is the comprehensive emancipation from every kind of oppression, including, more than anything else, the oppression of human sin and guilt. The main point of this verse, then, is that it is God who saves. Not only that, but he blesses his people, that is, he endows them with the peace and the joys of his presence.

The same thought is found in Jonah 2:9: “Salvation belongs to the LORD!” Indeed, this central theological and highly practical doctrine is spread throughout the pages of Scripture (e.g., Ps. 37:39; 62:7; Isa. 43:11; 45:21; Jer. 3:23; Hos. 13:14). Reformed theology has noted the strong connection between an utterly powerful God and the outworking of his loving, gracious purposes. Isaiah, just after the wonderful promise that death will be “swallowed up forever” and all tears will be wiped away from all faces, anticipates the declaration that God’s people will make when that great day arrives:

It will be said on that day,  
“Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he  
might save us.  
This is the LORD; we have waited for him;  
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.” (Isa. 25:9)

Here, God’s perfect, sovereign presence, the surety of the God who is there, is juxtaposed with the rewarded faith of his people, who waited for him not in vain. Now, at this hour, they may be glad and celebrate because of the reality of salvation.

In the New Testament this language is sometimes repeated verbatim, as it is in the last book of the Bible (Rev. 7:10). Or, it may be conjoined with complementary notions: “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God” (Rev. 19:1; see Rev. 4:11; 12:10). The heart of Reformed theology is to credit all good things, especially the comprehensive plan of redemption, to God and no one else. Paul tells Timothy not to be ashamed of the gospel message, despite the sufferings it will entail, but to recognize the power of God, “who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began” (2 Tim. 1:9).

In this sense, then, the central concern of Reformed theology is the sovereignty of God. But great caution is required here. This is often the place where most people struggle with the Reformed approach. Sovereignty appears to them to be cold and authoritarian. Perhaps we should find a better word. *Ascendancy*? *Supremacy*? *Dominion*? None of these quite captures it. In the end, the title *Lord* may say it as well as any. What we want to arrive at is a formulation that respects the all-powerful nature of God and the significance of human beings.

Put as a question, if salvation belongs to God alone, how is this not some kind of fatalism, the work of a God who coldly carries out his will and dangles people on a string? The clear answer from the vantage point of Reformed theology is that there is an enormous difference, one with life-and-death consequences. God is indeed fully in control. But being Lord means he establishes the world with its own significance, its freedom, and its responsibility. It is a measure of his

greatness that he can be fully in control of all things yet at the same time create a world that is real and a humanity that has freedom (Phil. 2:12–13). Creator and creature do not relate by a kind of trade-off whereby God gives up some of his power in order to ensure freedom for the creature. So, in fact, his power is far greater than that of the determinist. In Islamic teaching, one learns that Allah is more a cold programmer than a truly powerful orchestrator of the universe. What appears to be sovereignty is only a mechanical ability, like someone running a machine. Reformed theology tries to honor a God so great, so powerful, that the creature is truly free. There is great mystery here, but it is crucial not to fall into the temptation to downplay either God's power or human significance.

What many people fear when confronted with such a view of power is the impersonal. They fear a God who is far off, who is difficult of access. But the best kind of Reformed thinking stresses that what lies behind the plan of redemption is nothing of the kind. There is a God moved by love. The reason he saves is not to initiate a mechanical plan in some self-serving manner but that he has a heart of compassion for lost persons. "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you," the prophet Jeremiah records (Jer. 31:3). It is the love of God that causes salvation to occur, a love so compelling that it will stop at nothing to save (1 John 4:8–12). "God so loved the world," begins the best known verse of the Bible, "that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). The point, again, is that God is not an impersonal force, but a person, an all-powerful person to be sure, but yet a person who loves. His love is powerful, and his power is loving.

Here, the reader may be asking, what is so unique about this point of view? It is not entirely unique. Reformed theology shares a great deal with other accounts of the Christian faith. It agrees with the historic synopses of the Christian faith. One of the most succinct is the triad of creation, fall, and redemption. God made the world and everything in it. Humankind, his image-bearer, turned away from the Creator and attempted to live without him, resulting in the curse of a fallen world. But then God saved his people from death, condemnation, and

misery, through his only Son, Jesus Christ. There is nothing original about Reformed theology here, except that it wishes to draw the three themes out more powerfully and to give each its due weight, each in the right relation to the other.

### ***Full Expression of the Historic Faith***

Put this way, the Reformed faith means to give fullest expression to the basic statements in many of the creeds of the church. One of the best summaries of Christian belief is the Apostles' Creed, which many churches recite in the worship service. It was later enriched by other creeds but is remarkably full for such an early time in the church.<sup>2</sup>

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

This succinct yet integral summary of the fundamentals of the faith statement has withstood the test of time. Reformed theology wishes to build on this kind of creedal statement and work out the implications in depth.

The claim of Reformed theology is to be more consistent in the expression of these truths than other kinds of theology. It wants to give a fuller significance to each of these doctrines. It wants to avoid choos-

2. Not literally written by the apostles, it no doubt stems from the Old Roman Creed in the latter second century. It was used extensively in the early church.

ing some of them over others or stating one by diminishing another. True, there are constant themes running through the fabric of Reformed theology. The center, as we have seen, is the assured triumph of God's plan of redemption. In Paul's marvelous phrase, "The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29). But this center should highlight all other doctrines, not favor one over another. For example, it will stress two things about humanity. First, as God's image-bearers we have nobility, dignity, beauty. But, second, because of the fall, a parallel theme is a profound distrust of human virtue, combined with an urgent call to lean on the Lord for any hope. Reformed Christians have sometimes been caricatured for their negative assessment of human capabilities. Perhaps this is deserved in some cases. In its best expression the idea is not to denigrate human beings as creatures but fully to recognize the tragic effects of evil. The fall into sin has not reduced humankind to animals, but the fall has rendered humanity incapable of pulling itself up on its own.

Thus, Reformed theology hopes to go into more depth as it reflects on the basics. It should not be static but always seek to improve, to reform. Just as for people, growing in grace is not a luxury but a certainty, so in theology we should always look to improve. A famous motto, whose origins no one is sure about, has it that the church should be *semper reformanda quia reformata* (always reforming because reformed). In a word, it seeks to improve God's people by itself being a truly improving theology, one that constantly refuses conformity to an evil world and constantly looks to improve in its formulations and its practice (Rom. 12:1–2). This means that while it stands on the solid foundations of the past, this theology always wants to look for ways to be more faithful. In this endeavor Reformed theology should be in constant relation to other expressions of faith. It has a great deal to learn from other traditions. But it is also aware of its claim.

Two dangers present themselves. The first is a stubborn conservatism that refuses to accept challenges and insights from different sources. For example, there is a tendency of certain Reformed people to idealize the sixteenth or seventeenth century. Some would restrict their focus to the insights of John Calvin. Others would hold that the Puritans were the high-water mark of the Reformed universe, as though

little of real significance had been accomplished by anyone since. Without question, the theology and practical Christianity of the Puritans were astonishing, leaving to their distant heirs riches untold. But stopping the clock there is to deny the continuing work of God's grace down through the ages, including our own. In a certain way, we could not go back to the Puritan mentality, because the issues around us have changed. The Bible warns us against thinking that some former time was better (Eccl. 7:10).

The second danger is in a way the opposite. It is to be constantly looking for something new and original, like a branch trying to grow without a trunk. Some theologians are all too willing to abandon traditional formulations only because they are out of fashion. In the words of the apostle, this is from "itching ears," or, worse, "an unhealthy craving for controversy" (1 Tim. 6:4). It is without root or stability. The cult of the new is one of the chief plagues of our times. Even the exhausted mood of postmodernism is little more than a search for something different from the past. Theology that turns its back on the discoveries made by our predecessors for the sake of finding something new is simply foolish. The Holy Spirit continues to teach the church today but always builds on the shoulders of giants.

Living orthodoxy is the goal of Reformed theology. Of course, labels are not the most important thing. The best theology is not such because it has a label but because it agrees with "the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness" (1 Tim. 6:3). No label or creedal list can guarantee either life or orthodoxy. Indeed, there is no human statement of doctrines, however correct and well-ordered, that in itself can safeguard our faithfulness. Only when the humility of true godliness is combined with obedience to the sound words can a theology emerge that may hope to be orthodox (1 Tim. 1:10; 2 Tim. 1:13; Titus 2:2).

So, with all of these conditions in mind, we still want to contend that there is something faithful and true, something beautiful, something of concord and congruence, in Reformed theology. It is a fullsome, harmonious expression of the great truths of biblical faith. At its core, it wants to be profoundly biblical. It seeks to love God with the heart and the mind. Because of that, we commend it with all our heart.

### *The Idea of Reformation*

The actual term *reform[ed]* is rare in the Bible. If Reformed theology is so important, why do we not find the expression throughout the pages of the Bible? There are only two New Testament references that use the word. In the beginning of his prosecution of the apostle Paul before Marcus Antonius Felix, procurator of Judea, the accuser Tertullus expresses gratitude for Felix's administration. He notes his reforms on behalf of the Jewish people (Acts 24:2). In the context, it appears that Tertullus is thinking of various political benefits that accrued under this governor, which made the life of an occupied minority more tolerable. The second reference has a more religious connotation. The Book of Hebrews develops the contrast between the former age of symbols and the present age of fulfillment in Christ in some depth. In Hebrews 9:10 the author discusses the former "regulations for the body," which were regulatory "until the time of reformation." The Greek word behind the text is interesting. It means something like "making straight," either physically, as in the mending of a broken limb, or legally, as in amending a law or correcting an institutional deficit.

The fundamental idea of reformation, though, is spread throughout the pages of Scripture and is hardly dependent for its warrant on a particular word. What is that fundamental idea? It is, quite literally, the re-forming, the transformation that brings about change for the better. Reformation is not simply a matter of individual change, important though that may be. It is more intensive and more extensive than simply an improvement. The idea is expressed in Peter's proclamation from Solomon's Porch at the Jerusalem temple. After explaining why Christ is the true Savior, foretold by the prophets, he tells his listeners to get right with God: "Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19–20). Change is at the heart of Peter's command, but it is not simply the change of moral improvement. Rather, it is a massive turnabout from a previous condition of liability before God to the cleansing from guilt. Notice the wonderful lan-

guage used to describe this renewal: “times of refreshing [lit., cooling, as in cleansing waters] from the presence of the Lord.”

Reformation, in the Bible, is the radical renewal of a people who will know the presence of their God in every aspect of their lives. It presupposes that something has gone seriously wrong and then that the favor of the Lord comes to make all things new (Rev. 21:5). One could speak of a de-formation whose merciful remedy is a re-formation. Seen in this way, reformation is the fundamental story told in Scripture. Within a few paragraphs in the first book of the Bible we have an account of the fall of humankind and the ensuing pain and guilt. Over and over again, the people of God fall from their place of honor and privilege. But over and over they are restored to grace. It is wearisome to read through the Old Testament and experience its litany of corrupt rulers, jealous and vengeful men and women, blasphemous nations. But it is exhilarating, if deeply humbling, to read of God’s patience, of his extravagant, humanly impossible promises, and, finally, of his coming to us in the flesh, to bear our burdens, to suffer for our sins, and then to triumph over evil, so that we may become new creatures in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

One of the most moving accounts of reformation in the Bible is the story of the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem under the leadership of Nehemiah around 445 B.C. The people of Israel were in exile from their promised land. Their corruption had warranted the terrible judgment of banishment. Yet the Lord allowed them to return to their land and to its capital, the city of Jerusalem. Though the land was occupied, they had considerable freedom to worship God in traditional ways. The record describes three waves of returning exiles: under Zerubbabel, who saw to the rebuilding of the temple; under Ezra the great preacher; and finally under Nehemiah, who oversaw the rebuilding of the great walls of Jerusalem. In the book named for him, the text describes the way in which a weak and disheartened people were revived. The centerpiece of their reformation was responding to the book of the law. Not only were the five books of Moses read publicly (perhaps with other portions of the Old Testament), but also they were interpreted so that the people understood them clearly (Neh. 8:5–8). At first the people wept. So much had been lost. The Scriptures were a painful reminder of their

unfaithfulness to God. But then they were told to stop weeping and to begin a feast, just like the old days: “And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Neh. 8:10). In the days and weeks to come, this law was further studied and further applied, until the people renewed their covenant with the Lord. By learning to live for him despite being in occupied territory, they were able to rebuild an entire culture (Neh. 9:38). Truly, a reformation had occurred!

Moving from decadence to renewal is the heart of the biblical message. Real reformation is a transformation. Indeed, the successive transformations accorded by God are so great that we are told that John the seer beheld an unspeakably massive change, a cosmic reformation:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. (Rev. 21:1–4)

Any idea of reformation short of this glorious finale is inadequate to what God has for his people. Reformation, that is to say, is the process whereby God brings about the comprehensive, consummate change from the old to the new, from death to life, from enmity and alienation, to friendship and communion with God.

### ***Reformation Today***

It may go without saying that much of the world stands in need of reformation at the present time. Particularly in the Northern Hemi-

sphere, much of the Christian church is stagnant. As it faces globalization, shifting moral values, and all kinds of social and political realignments, the northern church is truly in exile, like the Jews in the time of Ezra. While there are many pockets of vitality, there has been considerable accommodation to the surrounding culture. We need to be brought back to the roots. In the light of the Word of God, we need to mourn, and then to rejoice at God's work of redemption, and then to rebuild, to *re-form* our lives. Even in the Southern Hemisphere, where so much amazing church growth is occurring, unless new believers are rooted and grounded in a solid world-and-life view, walking with God in love and integrity, it will not be long before decadence sets in. To watch the church in Africa, in Latin America, and in Asia is to witness extraordinary life and impact because of the gospel's power on those continents. But the growth will be on rocky soil, and birds are ready to scavenge the newly sown seed, unless a robust theology is featured along with the enthusiasm of new faith.