



Historical Roots

Who are Reformed Baptists? If you were to ask Reformed Baptists, they would likely say they are a people who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as revealed by the Bible. But that does not really describe Reformed Baptists because Reformed Baptists have specific convictions about the meaning of the Bible and thus the nature of Christ. So the real question is, “Who is Jesus Christ, and what do Reformed Baptists think the Bible means?”

In answer to that question, it would be correct to say that Reformed Baptists are people and churches who subscribe to the Second London Confession as a faithful summary of the Bible’s doctrines. The Second London Confession is in the same theological stream as the First London Confession,¹ and both of these confessions of faith were originally composed to show the overwhelming unity Reformed Baptists share with Reformed paedobaptists.² But identifying Reformed

1. While these are “Baptist” confessions, the first Baptists in London did not think of themselves as Baptists. Thus, these confessions were not originally titled “Baptist” confessions, but were simply identified as London confessions.

2. Some think the First London Confession and Second London Confession differ on the doctrine of God’s law, that the Second London Confession is strong on God’s law and the Sabbath while the First London Confession does not teach these doctrines. But scholars have proven this to be wrong. Jim Renihan gives five reasons that there is no substantial theological difference between the two. First, the method of editing the confessions was the same. Second, the writings of the men who edited the confessions articulated the same theology. Third, many of the men signed both confessions, showing there is no substantial difference. Fourth, the preface to the Second London Confession expressly says that its substance is the same as the First London Confession. Fifth, the First London Confession was highly scrutinized by those who held to the Reformed doctrine of law, and it was not found to have a different position. See James M. Renihan, “No Substantial Theological Difference between the First

Baptists with their historic confessions of faith, which were published in the latter part of the 1600s, could give a wrong impression.

It might appear from the dates of their confessions that Reformed Baptist beliefs are only about four hundred years old. But in reality, Reformed Baptists trace their theological heritage back to the church fathers, down through the Middle Ages, to the Protestant Reformation and to the post-Reformation period. Reformed Baptists consciously identify with the broad stream of historic orthodox Christianity. Referring to the fact that God's truth is ancient, Jeremiah 6:16 says, "Thus says the LORD: 'Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.'" Isaiah 51:1 teaches that believers should remember their historical roots: "Listen to me . . . look to the rock from which you were hewn."

Thus, Reformed Baptists do not see themselves as an elite sect of Christians, but as standing within the stream of historic catholic Christianity.³ Any discussion of Reformed Baptist theology, therefore, must account for Reformed Baptist doctrine as part of the ancient Christian faith, once and for all delivered to the saints. Because Reformed Baptists are catholic, the true Reformed Baptist spirit is also broad and catholic, recognizing that while they have their distinctive convictions about the meaning of the Bible, Christianity is bigger than any particular expression of it. In a sense, to be a Reformed Baptist is not to be anything special, but to be a Christian who stands within the historical theology of the church catholic, which is taught by the Bible and received by the best theologians of the church throughout history.

Therefore, to understand who Reformed Baptists are, we need to begin with church history. The history of the church is a history of

and Second London Baptist Confessions," Founders Ministries, Accessed February 14, 2024, <https://founders.org/articles/there-is-no-substantial-theological-difference-between-the-first-and-second-london-baptist-confessions/>.

3. The term "catholic" does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church (the Papacy) but to the true church universal, which has existed throughout history. "Catholic Christianity" refers to the body of doctrines and practices of the historic Christian faith, which are either expressly set down in Scripture or necessarily contained in it.

God's people clarifying and defending their articulation of God's truth over and against heresies that emerged from within the kingdom of darkness and threatened to subvert the kingdom of God. Church history is often messy because the visible church was so frequently led away from certain points of truth by the seduction of false teaching. However, God faithfully continued to send theologians and ministers of His Word who would defend the gospel and its necessary theological basis.⁴

When we examine the history of the church's doctrine in retrospect, we find that the church fathers were often at their clearest, and best, when orthodoxy was under the most intense attack.

Over the centuries, amid heated controversies, the fathers formulated doctrines that have proven to be faithful expressions of the inscripturated Word of God and have nourished God's people. Reformed Baptists especially agree with the church fathers at these points. What follows is a simplified doctrinal history of the church, to show that the cherished doctrines of the Reformed Baptists and their confessions of faith did not emerge in seventeenth-century England, but are rooted in the historical faith, once for all delivered to the saints.⁵

The Apologists: The Bible

One of the first controversies that plagued the church involved the doctrine of the biblical canon. The term "biblical canon" refers to the books that are accepted as biblical.⁶ From the very beginning, the church faithfully received the Scriptures that the apostles handed down to them. They accepted the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament that Christ affirmed during His earthly ministry. They also acknowledged the twenty-seven books of the New Testament based on three criteria:

4. One of the best entry-level introductions to the story of church history is Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 6th edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021).

5. An excellent history of doctrine, or theology, is Bengt Hägglund, *The History of Theology*, 4th rev. ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007). Another very good doctrinal history is John D. Hannah, *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001).

6. For an excellent treatment of the biblical canon, see Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).

- First, the books of the New Testament had to be authored by an apostle or someone closely associated with an apostle.
- Second, they had to have the same orthodox doctrine as the apostles and the rest of the Scriptures.
- Third, they needed to be books that were received by Christ's church from the very beginning.

Thus, while various church leaders and groups questioned the inclusion of certain books of the canon, there was never any serious or lasting question as to which books *are* sacred Christian Scripture among Christ's people as a whole. Nevertheless, during the first two hundred years after Christ's death, false teachers began to attack the biblical canon. Gnostic heretics wickedly claimed that the Old Testament is evil because it was inspired by a wicked god called the Demiurge, who created the material world. Gnostics believed that the god who created matter is different from the true God of the New Testament.

But the Apologists, early church fathers such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, made the case for what Christians had always believed: that the Old Testament is Christian Scripture; that the one true God created the world; that the material world is inherently good, though fallen; and that the twenty-seven New Testament books are consistent with the Old Testament. The early church fathers firmly rejected the Gnostic writings, which falsely claimed to be part of the New Testament.

During these debates of the first hundred years, the church reclaimed the doctrine of the biblical canon, which had been recognized from the beginning. The church once again reaffirmed the biblical canon at the Council of Carthage in AD 397.

Reformed Baptists accept the sixty-six books of the Bible received by the early church and reject the false writings of the Gnostics. They also reject the apocryphal writings of the intertestamental period, which were wrongly considered to be true Christian Scripture for the first time at the Council of Trent in the 1500s, when the Roman Catholic Church added them to their Bible.

Athanasius and the Nicene Creed: The Doctrines of God and the Trinity

Along with all orthodox Christians, Reformed Baptists gladly receive the major creedal formulations of the early fathers of the Western church, which clarify the nature of the Trinity and of Jesus Christ over and against the demonic doctrines of heretics.

Athanasius and the church fathers earnestly contended for the true faith against the false teaching of Arius, who heretically claimed that Jesus Christ is not God. Arius taught that the Son of God was God's greatest creation, but that the Son is not God subsisting as the Son, eternally generated from the nature of the Father. This same error is committed by Jehovah's Witnesses today.

Understanding the significance of this error, Athanasius strenuously argued that Jesus Christ must be true God for two reasons: First, He saves us from our sins, and second, we worship Him. God alone is able to save, and we may only worship God; therefore, Christ must be God, just as the Word of God teaches (John 1:1). Thus, Athanasius and the other faithful fathers at the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) reasserted the biblical doctrine of the Trinity in the Nicene Creed.

Reformed Baptists thus accept the ancient creeds that affirm the Bible's doctrine of the Trinity and Christ's divine sonship, including the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. They join the universal church in denouncing the Gnostic heretics, who deny Christ's human nature, and the Arians, who deny that the Son is God. The doctrines of these ecumenical creeds are also found in the Reformed Baptist confessions.

Reformed Baptists warmly accept the teaching of the universal church on God and the Trinity as accurately expressing the teaching of the Word of God. The Bible teaches that God is one simple and indivisible being (Ex. 3:14; Deut. 6:4) who eternally subsists in three persons: the Father, who is neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son who is eternally begotten from the Father (John 1:1, 14); and the Holy Spirit,

who eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son (John 15:26). Reformed Baptists are strong classical Trinitarian theists.

Augustine of Hippo: The Doctrine of Human Nature and Effectual Grace

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) defended the Bible’s doctrine of fallen human nature over and against the man-centered heresy of Pelagianism. A British monk named Pelagius taught that God graciously gives human beings a nature able to obey His gracious commands. Pelagius believed God’s commands imply human ability to obey them. So he insisted that anyone may obey God if he chooses to obey.

But Augustine rejected Pelagius’s doctrine of human ability and taught instead that fallen human beings are unable to obey God, unless God gives them effectual grace that makes them able and willing (John 6:44). Augustine famously wrote, “Give what you command, and then command whatever you will.”⁷ He also taught the doctrine of unconditional predestination, that God graciously chooses some fallen human beings and gives them the necessary effectual grace to be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:5).

Reformed Baptists heartily affirm Augustine’s doctrine of fallen human nature that is utterly incapable of renewing itself or bringing itself to God. They also affirm the doctrine of predestination and the necessity of effectual grace to bring the elect to God. They confess this as the clear teaching of God’s holy Word.

Anselm and the Middle Ages: Theological Method and Atonement

Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) was one of the faithful church fathers of the Middle Ages. He wanted his students to understand why they believed what they believed. He saw that it is not enough merely to believe the biblical doctrines of the faith. Rather, biblical doctrines

7. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A., ed., *WSA*, Part 1, Vol. 1, trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B., *Confessions*, Book 10, Chapter 29 (New York: New City Press, 1997), p. 263.

ought to be understood with the proper use of reason. This is a tradition that would later be called scholasticism.

In his *Proslogion*, Anselm taught that theology is “faith seeking understanding.” He further explained, “Unless you believe, you will not understand.” Both of these ideas arise from Augustine’s doctrine of human nature. Sinful human beings must exercise reason by free grace through humble faith if they wish to understand the truth of God’s Word properly.

So Anselm not only affirmed Scripture’s final authority, but as a scholastic in his theological method, he also believed in using reason to synthesize and explain the truths of the Bible as a whole. Anselm employed logic and reason in the work of theology because he understood that reason comes from God, and that perfected reason is nothing other than the being of God Himself (the eternal Word or *logos*).

Reformed Baptists agree with the tradition that students of Scripture should make humble use of reason and the laws of logic, by faith, when studying the Word of God. The Bible teaches that Paul was skilled in knowledge (2 Cor. 11:6), as were Moses (Acts 7:22) and Apollos (Acts 18:24). In Isaiah 1:18, God speaks to His people and says, “Come now, let us reason together.” The Bible reasons with us about its own teachings and therefore models faithful reasoned reflection on God’s truth.

Anselm used his method of “faith seeking understanding” when thinking about the doctrine of Christ and His atonement. In his book *Cur Deus Homo* (*Why God Became Man*), Anselm asked, why did the Son of God have to become man in order for God to forgive sin? Couldn’t God simply cancel the debt of a sinner by kingly fiat as a mere act of His will? Anselm reasoned that such a thing would be impossible because God had been dishonored by the sin of human beings. Therefore, God the Son, who has infinite value, had to assume a human nature so that He could die and restore the honor of God.

Reformed Baptists wholeheartedly receive the biblical and historic teaching of the necessity of Christ’s incarnation and atonement for the redemption of sinners (Luke 24:26; Heb. 9:22).