Why the Reformed Church?
What is the chief end of man?

Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question and Answer 1
Imagine walking into a church where the service is held in a language which no one understands. Imagine the pastor teaching (now in a language you understand) that you could go to heaven if you just gave him more money. Imagine being asked to kneel before an object and worship it.

You do not have to be a Christian to know that something is not right here. This church is corrupt. This church needs to change.

If you agree with that, then you are on the side of the Reformers who found themselves in that exact situation five hundred years ago, and who sought to reform the church and bring it closer to what it ought to be. Tragically, each of the situations described above can still be found in churches today. I doubt that anyone who is aware of the state of the church does not think that it needs a lot of reformation.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the verb *reform* as “to make changes in (something, especially an institution or practice) in order to *improve* it.”
“Change” has been a big buzzword of our generation and is a particular favourite of politicians. Of course, we all recognize that change can go in two directions, for better or worse, but you would agree that change for the better is something we could all use.

The problem which really hinders change, however, is our tendency to focus on the things that others need to change. We often console ourselves by saying, “See, we are not as bad as these other people!” This is true whether in a marriage or in politics, and this is certainly true about churches as well. It is easy to look at someone else and say, “This is what is wrong with you,” and come up with a long list of problems. It is much harder to listen when that is said to us.

Realizing that the same tendency applies to myself, it is with much reluctance that I write these words. I pray that you too would agree that such a call to reformation is necessitated by the seriousness of our situation, and that you would forgive any presumption on my part to sound it.
Why Reform?
In the fourth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle writes that Christ ascended into heaven to give gifts (apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, pastoral, etc.) to build up the church. The end goal of these gifts is given in verse 13, “Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

This verse is both challenging and comforting. It is challenging because of the dire state of the church today; fragmented into thousands of parts, plagued with error and ungodliness, and far from the unity, maturity or fullness of Christ that we are called to be.

But it is also comforting because this task of uniting and maturing the church is something that the Lord Jesus has not left us to figure out on our own, but has taken upon himself to accomplish. It is the reason he could not stay on the earth after his resurrection. It is what he went to heaven to do, what he has, in fact, been doing the last two thousand years, and what he will not
stop doing until we all — all of his church — arrive at that unity and maturity. This is God’s entire purpose for our age until Christ comes again in glory, and we can be sure that the Father will not allow anything to stand in the way of the growth of his Son’s body. But until then, even the purest and best formed of churches must keep re-forming.

How to Reform?
Among Christians, the word “edify” (meaning “to build”) is often used without considering the edifice that is to be edified. In Ephesians 2:20, the church is said to be a temple for God’s Spirit, “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone” This apostolic foundation which defines the church is not the office of the Apostles, but the teaching of the Apostles once for all delivered to us in the Word of God – the Scriptures of Christ and the Christ of Scripture. No other foundation is to be laid (1 Corinthians 3:10-11). No other church is to be built.
This question of authority is the most basic one behind any and every decision for change. How do we decide whether to change, what to change, and what to change into? How do we know? Who gets the final say? To each of these questions, Scripture claims its own place as the only infallible rule of faith and life, bearing the authority of God himself (1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19-21).

Not all change is good. Reformation which departs from this principle of *Scripture alone* is no longer reformation, but deformation. Paul gives a stern warning that everyone is to “take heed how he builds” lest he defile the temple of God which is the church (1 Corinthians 3:10, 17). In order to build up, we must keep looking down to the foundation to make sure that what we build is aligned to it.

Nevertheless, the assumption is that we will not simply sit and stare at this foundation, but that we will build upon it. To stubbornly refuse to change is also to oppose God’s purpose and thus to exclude oneself from
it. Both conservatism and progressivism for their own sakes are betrayals of the principle of Scripture alone.

To properly reform then, we must give no place for either nostalgia (it’s always been done this way!) or novelty (it’s never been done this way!). We must give no authority to either one’s own opinions and feelings, or to societal norms and political pressures. We must obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29).

In the face of the death penalty, Martin Luther made the bold statement, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God.” His concern was not pragmatism – neither what would be most popular nor what would save his neck – but obedience to God. He was willing to stake his life on and to go wherever God led him through his written Word. Are you?

**What to Reform: Worship**

The most lasting and prominent contribution of the Reformation which began five hundred years ago has been its doctrine of salvation: the teaching that one is
saved by grace alone, through faith alone, and not by works (Ephesians 2:8-9). In the classic defense of The Necessity of Reforming the Church, the French Reformer John Calvin began, however, not with the doctrine of salvation, but with worship.

The importance of this order should not be overlooked, as it tragically has been in many churches. God’s worship is more important than man’s salvation simply because God is more important than man. God saves us so that we can worship him. Over and over in the Bible we learn that God deals kindly with us for his own sake, not ours (Psalm 106:8; Isaiah 48:9, 11; Ezekiel 36:22; Romans 9:22-23). God commanded Pharaoh over and over again, “Let my people go,” not so that they could be freed from being Pharaoh’s slaves to live their own lives, but so that they may worship and serve God as his slaves (Exodus 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3). God has claimed us as his own because he is worthy of our worship.

Sometimes, the way salvation is preached today, it almost seems as though God saves us because he
worships us; because we are worthy of being saved, because we deserve better. This is nothing less than blasphemy (insulting God), but how often do we see churches willing to compromise on the worship service in order to attract more people? How often do we hear sermons that are about how man can have a better life with less guilt and less problems, instead of how man ought to be obeying and glorifying God even if it means more pain and more problems (Psalm 119:143)?

It is easy to say that God is bigger than man, but our worship reflects what we truly believe about God and about ourselves. The god we are not afraid to worship according to our own inventions is a god of our own imaginations. And if the Bible and history has proved anything about us, it is undoubtedly that our minds are idol-factories, churning out gods after our own image.

Still today, the Roman and Eastern Orthodox churches continue to venerate idols and images. Sadly, even Protestant churches still include large crucifixes in their worship places and pictures of Jesus in their Bibles.
Have we forgotten how severely Israel and Judah were punished for their idolatry? Have we too become as blind as our idols, unable to see such blatant idolatry for what it is (Psalm 115:5-8; Isaiah 44:9-20)? Do we despise the Lord’s many patient warnings and think that we are somehow immune from this pervasive sin?

The sin of idolatry, moreover, is not restricted simply to physical idols and images. All methods of worship not commanded by God are equally forbidden. Nadab and Abihu, two sons of Aaron the priest, were consumed by fire because they offered incense that the Lord “had not commanded them” (Leviticus 10:1-2; cf. Exodus 30:9), and which they presumed to do upon their own understanding.

This principle of “what is not commanded in worship is forbidden,” or what has been called the Regulative Principle of Worship, led the Reformed church to return to the simplicity and spirituality of New Testament worship characteristic of earliest Christianity. This meant rejecting the much later additions of clerical
vestments, observances of holy days, and many other
superstitious and unbiblical practices contrary to the
liberty of the Gospel (Galatians 4:9-10; Colossians 2:16-
19). With these shadows removed, the worshipper’s
focus could be re-centred upon the preached Word,
through which the substance of the Gospel – the person
and work of Jesus Christ – could be proclaimed, received,
and enjoyed without hindrance (Romans 10:14-17;
Ephesians 3:8-11).

Historically, this also resulted in the singing of the
Psalms exclusively without accompaniment by instru-
m ents. A more detailed explanation of this position on
worship which can be accessed freely on the internet is
John McNaugher’s The Psalms in Worship (1907).

What is most regrettable is that many churches not
only do not sing the Psalms at all, but have never even
heard of Psalm-singing, which was once the universal
practice of the church. Others prefer the compositions of
men to the inspired Word of God simply for sentimental,
man-centred reasons.
If we believe that God is infinitely greater, wiser, and more holy than we are, we will let him tell us how he wants to be worshipped, rather than thinking that we know better. Let us worship God acceptably with reverence and godly fear, for our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29; Deuteronomy 4:24).

**What to Reform: Doctrine**

If our worship should reflect the holiness and transcendence of God as well as the humility and dependence of men, then our understanding of salvation should be no different. God does not need our worship, and neither does he need to save us. He does not owe us anything. We owe him everything. We depend on him to tell us how to worship him, and we depend on him to tell us how we are to be saved.

The Reformation began with the struggle against an elaborate and imaginative tradition of what needs to be done for one to be saved, part of which included paying for the Pope’s renovation of his Roman palace. This
abuse led the Reformers to the principle of *Scripture alone*, where they found the freedom of the true Gospel that the Christ had promised (John 8:32). This freedom was tied to another principle – that of *faith alone*.

If one had to keep the law in order to be made right with God, then none could be saved, for all have broken God’s law and are thus under his penalty of death. The law makes nobody righteous before God. It only makes one more conscious of his sin (Romans 3:20)!

The more you realize what kind of perfection God requires, the more you understand how there can be no balancing the scales of justice with your good works. It has an offended and infinitely holy God on one side, and your pathetic, sinful self on the other. You have been weighed and found wanting.

The only way out is for God to satisfy the demands of his own justice for us, and he has! God will provide his own righteousness, apart from the deeds of the law, to all who believe in Christ (Romans 3:22). The perfect obedience of the Son of God and his bearing the curse of death
due to our sins will be imputed (counted) to those who simply receive it by faith.

And because it is by faith alone, it is also by grace alone. Grace means an unearned and undeserved kindness. It is provided gratis, free of charge. No payment will be accepted. No boasting in one’s own merits or efforts will be heard (Romans 3:27; 1 Corinthians 1:27-31). Our salvation is a gift from beginning to end, and never a wage earned or a debt owed to us. Our only contribution to the equation is our sin.

This is why Protestants do not make “saints” even of the best Christians. In Christ, we are all already saints in God’s judgment (we are, by imputation, as perfectly righteous as Christ himself!), but so are we also all wretched sinners until the day we die (Romans 7:24).

This way of salvation is not by accident. God designed it such for a purpose, and that purpose, you might have guessed, is not for the glory of man, but for the glory of God through Christ (Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14). This is the centre of all of God’s work, and of all of
Scripture, and thus of all the Christian faith: \textit{in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone}. These are non-negotiable.

The other principles of \textit{Scripture alone, faith alone, and grace alone} are there because when we start coming up with our own ideas of how salvation should work, it is inevitable that we will take away glory from God \textit{alone} and give some of it to ourselves. We start praying to saints (and to idols of saints!) instead of to God alone through Christ alone. We start making much of our own deeds and decisions instead of God’s free and unconditional choice to love and be gracious to us in spite of our deeds and decisions, the best of which are sinful enough to condemn us eternally to hell.

When we try to add our own works to Christ’s, we are saying that the blood he shed for us on the cross is insufficient for our salvation. What blasphemy!

\textbf{What to Reform: Life}

But just because salvation is not by keeping the law, it does not mean therefore that one should not keep the law.
The Reformation strongly rejected that kind of faulty and dangerous thinking. The law was meant to show us our sin so that we may turn away from our sin, not from the law. We do not keep the law so that we might be saved, but we were saved so that we might keep the law (Ephesians 2:10; Titus 2:14)! Again, the focus is not on us but on God. We don’t keep the law primarily for our own good, even though it is certainly good for us. It is important that God’s people keep God’s law, because it brings glory to God (Matthew 5:16).

As such, much attention must be given to the law, especially to the Ten Commandments, which are God’s own summary of his law. They reflect the holiness of God. They show us the beauty of Christ. Those who love him and hope to see him must purify themselves according to the law (John 14:15, 21; 15:10; 1 John 2:3; 3:2-3).

Tragically, many pastors, not to mention their congregants, are ignorant of this most basic teaching of the Bible on Christian living. Without looking at the next page, do you know which is the Third Commandment?
You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain (Exodus 20:7).

We are told that we will have to account for every careless word that we speak (Matthew 12:36), and yet many Christians so flippantly use God’s and Jesus’ names like they use exclamation marks. Do you see how little we make of God when we do that, or when we allow someone to do that in front of us and we say nothing about it because we are afraid to offend that little person, but we are not afraid that he has offended the great God? We hardly ever take such sins seriously enough, but the Bible says that your Christianity is a worthless vanity if you don’t control your tongue (James 1:26).

What about the Fourth Commandment?

Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God, in it you shall not do any work.
Keeping the Lord’s Day (Sunday) holy unto the Lord also includes not doing and talking as we please on that day (Isaiah 58:13). It is how we recognize that it is his day, not just our own day that we may or may not set aside some time to go to church as we like or as we don’t.

And yet how many Christians do just the “bare minimum” of attending one worship service in the morning, if at all, and then spending the rest of that day on themselves? All our time is given to us by God and so he has the right to require us to do what he wants with it. In fact, we ought to worship God all seven days of the week, and we should desire it to be so (it will in heaven!), but God has allowed us six days to use for other activities, work and play. How we rob God of his glory when we do not think him worthy of even one day in seven for his worship!

Do you habitually break the Seventh Commandment? The Ninth? Do you even know what they are? It is easy to say that God is big and we are small. It is right and good to have a worship service that reflects that and a
theological system that is built upon that. But it is all a show if we are not interested to live it out in our lives.

Ultimately, reformation depends simply on whether we love God enough to deny ourselves and to change the things we like to the things he likes. Do you choose to attend a church (if you do at all) based on whether it worships, believes, and lives according to God’s Word, or how it serves you and makes you feel? Do you plan your week around God’s worship, or do you fit him in where it is most convenient for you? Do you fix your prayer times and then plan the rest of the day (including sleep!) so that it will not interfere with those most precious meetings with God? Do you live as one who exists to serve him, or do you live as though God exists to serve you? Is God more important or are you more important? I pray the Lord will lead you not only to confess, but to live the truth, because nothing else you do in life can be more important than pleasing him.
Conclusion: Where to Reform?
Reformation involves making all necessary changes in our individual, family, church, and even national lives until they fully comply with God’s Word, because they all belong to God and owe him their complete obedience.

However, as we read in the fourth chapter of Ephesians, Christ gives the gifts necessary for reformation to the church (more specifically to the officers of the church), and so the task of reforming must begin with the task of learning and living the Scriptures as the church, under the guidance of those whom Christ has called and gifted to be pastors.

The reformation of the church comes first also because it is by far the most important. The church is the body of Christ, the only institution for which Christ died and the only one which will endure forever, because it is where God has chosen to be glorified for all eternity (Ephesians 3:21)! We can be sure that the God who did not spare the life of his only and most beloved Son to purchase the church to be his treasured possession, will
also spare no effort to reform it, and so neither should we (Titus 2:14, 1 Peter 2:9).

Nevertheless, not all can effect change in the church as much as they can in their own and their family’s lives. Reformation at any level aids in the reformation of the church, and is worth striving for.

If you would like to know more about how to reform your church, or desire in your own life or family to keep getting better at loving God, worshipping God, learning of God, and living for God according to his Word and for his glory, you will find many helpful articles as well as information on how to contact us at our Web address: www.pilgrim-covenant.com

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