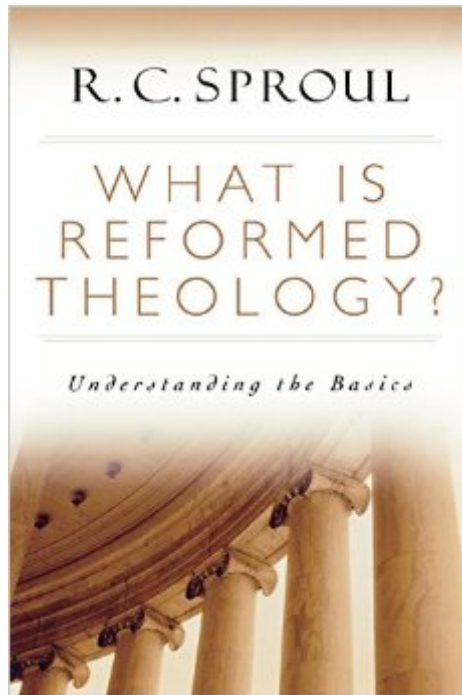


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# What Is Reformed Theology?: Understanding The Basics



## Synopsis

What Do the Five Points of Calvinism Really Mean? Many have heard of Reformed theology, but may not be certain what it is. Some references to it have been positive, some negative. It appears to be important, and they'd like to know more about it. But they want a full, understandable explanation, not a simplistic one. *What Is Reformed Theology?* is an accessible introduction to beliefs that have been immensely influential in the evangelical church. In this insightful book, R. C. Sproul walks readers through the foundations of the Reformed doctrine and explains how the Reformed belief is centered on God, based on God's Word, and committed to faith in Jesus Christ. Sproul explains the five points of Reformed theology and makes plain the reality of God's amazing grace.

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## Customer Reviews

Growing up in a Baptist church, I knew very little about Reformed theology. When I started attending a "Reformed" church my only concern was how dogmatically they might teach Calvinism- which in my mind had something to do with TULIP and God forcing people to believe in Him. I have no doubt that many others have seen Reformed theology in a similar light. In *What is Reformed Theology?* Dr. R.C. Sproul attempts to distill the doctrines of the reformers into a simple and accessible format, and correct many of the misunderstandings many of us have had of it. Dr. Sproul begins in the introduction affirming that what is being discussed is not a Reformed religion, but more appropriately Reformed theology. It is "not merely a religion without theology. It is driven first and foremost by its

understanding of the character of God." (20) The book is divided into two parts. The first consists of five chapters on the foundations of Reformed theology- 1) Centered on God 2) Based on God's Word Alone 3) Committed to Faith Alone 4) Devoted to Prophet, Priest, and King 5) Nicknamed Covenant Theology. Part two is Dr. Sproul's explanation of what is commonly known as TULIP- 6) Humanity's Radical Corruption 7) God's Sovereign Choice 8) Christ's Purposeful Atonement 9) The Spirit's Effective Call 10) God's Preservation of the Saints. Throughout the book Dr. Sproul draws Reformed theology up against Roman Catholicism and Pelagius, periodically against Dispensationalism, and at a couple of points against Lutheranism. This is often helpful in order to more fully understand the Reformed position, but I suspect at some points the opposing views are short changed and dismissed without a fair hearing. This is not a book defending Reformed theology. Anyone who reads this hoping that it is will be rather disappointed. It is more accurately a description of Reformed theology. The Westminster Confession and Reformed thinkers are cited almost as much, if not as much, as the Bible. Many points of Reformed theology that are described are not argued for, though he does take up arguments for and/or against a few doctrines. As a descriptive work it's fairly well done. However, I'm afraid there is a limited audience who will appreciate this book. Those educated and trained in theology will likely find the book simplistic. Those who aren't may find it hard to follow. Dr. Sproul goes into some great explanations of terms like justification, but in the process he uses other terms that he doesn't even bother to define. There is a glossary, however it only contains foreign (Latin and Greek) words that he uses. A more substantive glossary would have been very helpful for this book. For me, and I suspect others from similar backgrounds, *What is Reformed Theology?* is helpful in bringing to bear the big picture of Reformed theology, as well as the history of the doctrines. R.C. Sproul is enjoyable and informative, as he usually is. I recommend this book to anyone seeking to understand Reformed theology, though, they will likely need to look elsewhere to be persuaded of it if they're not already.

Most Christians have heard of Reformed theology. Most think they have a good handle on it. But experience has shown me that few really know it as well as they think they do. And that goes for people who claim to be Reformed as much as those who do not. This cannot be said of R.C. Sproul. Not only does Sproul have an amazingly broad but detailed grasp of Reformed theology, but he has also been gifted with the ability to explain complex theology in a way that is both interesting and understandable. That is no common gift. *What Is Reformed Theology?*, which was formerly published under the more obscure title *Grace Unknown*, is Sproul's attempt to help others understand the basics of Reformed theology. Surprisingly, only fifty percent of the book is dedicated

to a discussion of the Five Points. The first half provides the foundations for Reformed theology which so many similar books have overlooked. Without first understanding the foundations, the reader will have a much more difficult time understanding the Five Points. And so Sproul begins by discussing God's sovereignty; the importance of Scripture as the only infallible rule for our faith; faith alone; Christ's threefold office of Prophet, Priest and King; and Covenant Theology. Each of these is explained in detail, yet with sufficient precision that they are simple enough to understand. The second half of the book is an examination of the Five Points of Calvinism: Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace and Perseverance of the Saints. Like many other theologians, Sproul has come to see that this acrostic, while helpful, does as much to obscure the points as it does to clarify them. Sproul prefers to speak of Radical Corruption, Sovereign Choice, Purposeful Atonement, Effective Calling and Preservation of the Saints. These terms do much to clarify common misunderstandings. For example, it is easy to assume from the term "Total Depravity" that Reformed Christians believe humans are exactly as evil and depraved as they could be - their depravity is total. Yet Reformed theology teaches that while humans are corrupt, and even radically corrupt, they are so in extent, not in degree. Depravity extends to every aspect of the person, but thanks to the grace of God the degree may be more or less. I must note that as helpful as this book is, it is not one to give your unsaved friend. Sproul assumes knowledge of the Bible and of Christian theology. Even a young Christian may have a difficult time wrestling with some of the terms and concepts. It is ideal, though, for the Reformed believer who is seeking to clarify his beliefs or for the non-Reformed Christian who wants to understand what Reformed theology is all about. Accessible, biblical and educational, this is one of the best books I have read on the subject, and it just so happens that I have read quite a few. Sproul has done Christianity a service by so clearly articulating the foundations and beliefs of Reformed theology. Needless to say, I give it my recommendation.

As a student of Scripture that disagrees slightly with Calvin, but is in ministry with some Reformed people, I picked up this book in hopes of understanding Reformed theology. Dr. Sproul's book does a superb job of this. The book is designed to center around the central themes in Reformed theology. He begins with what Reformed theology is not, and gives a short description of how Reformed theology came to be. He does not use the standard terms in his descriptions, like the 5 Solas or the 5 points of Calvin, aka TULIP. Basically, Sproul uses the evidence he proposes to work into these terms instead. He discusses how Reformed theology relates to other Christian theologies, namely Catholicism and Lutheranism. In my ministry, I have been in contact with some from the

Reformed theology that puts their beliefs in pretty harsh language when comparing it to others' theology. Sproul makes his case without this harsh language, which I thought refreshing. His discussion is scholarly without being too much for lay-people to understand. He discusses the history and controversies throughout, and many early and current theologians. He does not ignore the arguments used against ideas such as perseverance of the saints, and gives the opposition a fair shake. This is a superbly written and thorough introduction to Reformed theology. He does not go to tradition or teachings of others first and then go to Scripture as some do in their defense of Reformed theology. And, he follows the Christian precept given in 2 Tim 4:2 telling us to carefully instruct by speaking in less harsh tones. Overall, this is a perfect book to learn about Reformed theology's teachings.

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