



## **What is Reformed Theology?: Understanding the Basics**

*R.C. Sproul*

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## What is Reformed Theology?: Understanding the Basics R.C. Sproul

Few evangelical Christians today understand Reformed theology, even though it has become an immensely influential theological tradition. Recognizing only key terms relating to predestination or the five points, many Christians want a better explanation of the concepts and beliefs that make up a Reformed perspective.

*What is Reformed Theology?* is an introduction to a doctrine that has eluded so many evangelical Christians. And who better to teach about Reformed theology than R. C. Sproul? In thoroughly expounding the foundational doctrines and five points, Sproul asserts the reality of God's amazing grace.

For anyone wanting to know more about Reformed theology, this candid book offers a coherent and complete introduction to an established belief.

Previously published as *Grace Unknown*

## What is Reformed Theology?: Understanding the Basics Details

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Author : R.C. Sproul

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# From Reader Review What is Reformed Theology?: Understanding the Basics for online ebook

## Lucas Carvalho says

Excelente. Dr. Sproul escreve com maestria. O livro, apesar de pequeno, é uma mina de ouro. Sproul vai direto ao ponto, sempre mostra seu argumento na Confissão de Westminster. Um pequeno livro de grande valor.

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## Jordan Shirkman says

When it comes to explaining complex concepts in the simplest way, R. C. Sproul is one of the best.

A great primer on reformed theology for those unfamiliar. Winsome and fair toward opposing view points, while being convincing of his own perspective and biblical convictions.

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## Tom James says

Another clearly written book explaining theology and keeping it interesting by R.C. Sproul. The book explains what Reformed Christians believe about God, Christ, the covenants, and the five points. While I believe Scripture speaks of more covenants than three, Sproul's presentation of Reformed Calvinism is clear and, generally, persuasive. His treatment of the dilemma of Hebrews 6 is interesting, but I wish he would have developed it further.

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## Carlos Montijo says

Though I disagree with Sproul's philosophy on certain points and definitions of faith and of the will, this book discusses heavy duty theology in a very readable manner without watering them down. It not only covers TULIP but also historical theology and the historical and theological context of the Reformation.

Sproul is an outstanding theologian, but his philosophy can be pretty bad. He relies too much on Thomas Aquinas for his philosophy. "Our theology should be informed by both the Bible and nature" (18). I think Gordon Clark gives the best, most biblical and consistently Reformed philosophy (see <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/arch...>).

Sproul claims that "the presence of both *notitia* [understanding the Gospel] and *assensus* [assenting to or agreeing with the Gospel] is still insufficient for justification" (74) because "a third element must be present...*fiducia*, a personal trust and reliance on Christ... *Fiducia* also involves the affections" (74). I disagree, for the Bible simply says to "repent and believe the Gospel" (Mark 1:15), i.e. know the Gospel and agree with it.

When describing the will of man, Sproul disagrees with determinism--that "our choices are controlled by

external forces [including God]" (134)--and, in accordance with Jonathan Edwards' "self-determination," explains that "we choose according to our strongest inclination at the moment" (135). However, this makes God more of a "roof" that limits our wills but doesn't affect them directly. The Westminster Confession's and Gordon Clark's determinism sounds more Biblical: God is the ultimate cause of all things, including sin, but uses secondary causes (such as our wills) to accomplish His good purpose.

His chapter on the Atonement ends abruptly too, and I think he should've quoted Roman Catholic sources directly when addressing them. Nevertheless, Sproul offers a great intro to Reformed theology, and I learned a great many things pertaining to covenant theology, historical theology, and more. Read it!

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### **Logan says**

A simple, succinct introduction to the basic tenets of reformed theology. Well worth the read for both new and veteran Christians, as well as those interested in reformed theology.

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### **Amanda says**

Maybe more like 3.5 Thank you, Ligonier Ministries, for the free copy of this book.

This is a very clear and helpful explanation of the essential doctrines within Reformed Theology. One thing that makes me a bit uncomfortable is the constant reference to the Westminster Confession and the other Reformers in the support of RT. Sproul seems to quote from the WCoF as much as or more than Scripture itself. And though I appreciate the WCoF as a helpful synthesis of Scripture, it is not the inspired Word of God. Perhaps I am being too sensitive. To be fair, Sproul does examine Scripture very carefully in this book and mentions toward the end that we must allow Scripture to interpret Scripture, especially in cases of ambiguity or seeming contradictions. A proper view of the WCoF would be that it is descriptive, not prescriptive, of the Scriptures that Reformed Theology is based on and should be examined and reexamined against God's Word.

Something that confused me a bit was Sproul's reference to Dispensationalism and Dispensationalist Calvinists. My understanding of Dispensationalism comes primarily from Michael Vlach's book Dispensationalism: Essential Beliefs and Common Myths. Vlach emphasizes that Dispensationalism concerns itself only with the doctrines of the Church and End Times and that Dispensationalism and Calvinism are not mutually exclusive. So Sproul's brief treatment of Dispensationalist Calvinists as not real Calvinists confused me.

Overall, I very much appreciate Sproul's clear explanation. There is much to continue to think about, pray about, and study. Even though I agree with much in this book, I'm not sure that I could unequivocally call myself a 5-point Calvinist. I don't think that I will ever really 'arrive' at full understanding of how seemingly opposing passages fit together, but it is my desire to continue to study and learn and let the Lord change my thinking.

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### **Elissa says**

This is an EXCELLENT theology book! Probably my favorite non-fiction book as well!

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## Callie says

One of my book goals of the year was to read more books that will help me grow spiritually - and I realized in recent months that I have kind of neglected theological books in my reading plan this year. Time to catch up! I saw "What Is Reformed Theology?" by R.C. Sproul up for review, and I decided to request it. I have some friends who go to a Reformed Theology church, and I generally agree with them on doctrine, but I really didn't know what was meant by "reformed theology". I was hoping to learn more from this book.

It did not disappoint! The first half of this book goes through points of sound biblical doctrine that I think all Christians agree on, but the part I liked is that it also included the church history that involved each point - including past heresies, and biblically why some of the great theologians came to the conclusions they did.

### A Few Negatives

This book got a little sticky here and there. The section on the different views of communion, while educational for distinguishing between different denominations, made the whole subject pretty confusing to me.

I feel like the author had a habit of lumping people together in groups, perhaps not always fairly. He used the term "dispensationalist" in a way that I have not heard before, and I don't agree with how he characterized this group. I have generally agreed with the (traditional) dispensationalist view of how to interpret Scripture, etc, but Sproul seemed to be picking on dispensationalism and contrasted dispensationalism with covenant theology. I have never heard these two terms put at odds with one another like this, and I don't think dispensationalism and covenant theology are mutually exclusive, as he seems to imply. He even says later that dispensationalists think that a person can be completely carnal and still a Christian because a new nature isn't necessarily given (in direct contradiction to Scripture) - I have never heard that and totally disagree. I may have to research more, but I grew up around people who described themselves as dispensationalists and I never heard anyone claim that, so I feel like he was being too rigid by lumping everyone together here. I have always just viewed dispensationalism as a way of interpreting Scripture literally that takes into account historical time periods; not as a complete theological system.

I also felt in reading this book that the author focused too much on intellectual arguments and quotes from the reformers - which were excellent - but I would have appreciated a greater focus on the Scriptures that back up these points as well. There was plenty of Scripture in this book, but I just wished he had connected some of the points he was making to Scripture a little more clearly.

### A Brief Digression On Calvinism And Evangelism

The second part of the book focuses on the five points of Calvinism, which is where the distinguishing feature of Reformed Theology lies. This is where a lot of you may stop reading, but let me just say, I think Calvinism gets a little bit of a bad rap in Christian culture today. This book explains the five points of Calvinism very well, I thought. The truth is, I tend to agree with Calvinism, because the underlying concepts are firmly rooted in Scripture. Even the doctrine of election, the one everyone likes to argue about, is really about who enables us to believe. Is it from our own virtue and intelligence, or is it because God has stirred our hearts and given us the ability, even to believe? I think the latter is what is in line with Scripture. But I still hesitate to call myself a Calvinist, not because I disagree with any of their points necessarily, but

because I think Calvinism gets a little too hung up on the intellectual and neglects the practical. There is one point that I've never heard a Calvinist explain to my satisfaction, and I wish this book would have addressed it more clearly too - and that is the matter of evangelism.

This book addressed evangelism in a cursory way by referring to the "external call", and then focusing on the Spirit's "internal call" that leads someone to salvation, but I wish it would have focused a little more on what we, as Christians, are to do as far as evangelism goes. In Scripture there is a clear call to evangelism, for Christians to tell others about the "good news" of Jesus and His sacrifice for our sins. This is a pretty vital piece to the puzzle in how someone comes to know Jesus, and Scripture doesn't minimize it's importance.

"How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"'" Romans 10:14-15

I feel like Calvinism in practical terms seems to minimize the importance of evangelism, when it is clearly something we are called to in Scripture. The focus seems to always be on the point of election (which to be fair, is forced upon Calvinists because other Christians are always attacking them on this point), and I wish we could all just chill out a little and remember that God's ways are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts. His actions do not have to make perfect sense to our little human brains, but He is always righteous and good, and He owes explanations to no one.

God told us what He needs us to know in His Word, which is truth, and it's just our job as Christians to believe His Word and do what He says, and pray and ask for clarity when something is confusing. I think there are some on the anti-Calvinist side who would do well to get back to a focus on and understanding of Scripture instead of rejecting the (biblical) concept of election outright because it doesn't jive with their own sense of justice. Our focus should ever be on Scripture because that is where the truth lies, and Christian culture today seems to be poorly lacking here. And I think there are some on the Calvinist side who would do well to stop hitting others over the head intellectually with the election concept and instead point other Christians to Scripture and pray for the Holy Spirit to make His truth clear. And we all need to recognize and remember that the concept of election has no bearing either way on the call to evangelism toward those who are still lost in their sin. Scripture makes it very clear that we are to proclaim the truth of the Gospel.

So there you go, a little opinion on the Calvinism debate. Back to the book.

## Positives

This book addressed the "justice" concern of some who don't agree with Calvinism very well, better than any other piece I've read on the subject. I like this quote:

"The concept of justice incorporates all that is just. The concept of non-justice includes everything outside the concept of justice: injustice, which violates justice and is evil; and mercy, which does not violate justice and is not evil. God gives his mercy (non-justice) to some and leaves the rest to His justice. No one is treated with injustice. No one can charge that there is unrighteousness in God." pg. 187-188

I thought that explained really well why it is not correct to say God is not just when He chooses to save only some. Like I said, this book overall explains Calvinism (and Reformed Theology) better than any other book I've read. Whether you are a Calvinist, or have just been confused by any points of Calvinism in the past, I think this is a great resource if you really want to understand the beliefs of Calvinism clearly.

And as for Reformed Theology, the defining point touches on something I mentioned earlier - the distinction between unconditional election, and conditional election. Conditional election says that God calls those who He foresees will accept Him, and this is where that point gets sticky: who gives those people the ability to accept Jesus? Is it something good in themselves that allows people to accept Jesus? I'd have to say no - based on Scripture (many of the supporting Scriptures are shared in this book), it is the Holy Spirit who calls the believer and enables them to believe, and without the Holy Spirit working in us, none of us would believe. We'd go on choosing our sin. Unconditional election (which is what distinguishes Reformed Theology) says that it is nothing in ourselves that enables us to be saved, but it is by God's grace in working in us to enable us to seek Him and find Him.

In case you think that is a nit-picky distinction, you should be aware that this book is very intellectual and breaks each doctrine down to its elements, which I found very interesting, and very well done (though it perhaps falls into debating things that aren't as important here and there as well). If you have ever wanted to know more about the basics of Christian doctrine and how we get those basics, and what the Reformation was all about, pick up this book for the first half. If/when you want to learn more about where Calvinism gets its five points, dive into the second half of this book.

I think I'll just wrap up this review with my favorite quote from this book:

"I cannot adequately explain why I came to faith in Christ, and some of my friends did not. I can only look to the glory of God's grace toward me, a grace I did not deserve then and do not deserve now." pg. 177

That's the bottom line, isn't it? For me, this book was a great reminder that it is not through any virtue of mine but only through His power and grace that I am saved, and that is a strikingly beautiful thing.

Note: I received a copy of this book for free in exchange for a review. This is my honest opinion.

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### **Harold says**

Great book - well organized, has depth of content but is still readable by laypersons. R.C. Sproul really takes these complex ideas and communicates them clearly and understandably.

I think the book (being an extended argument for Reformed theology/Calvinism) could do a better job of presenting the Arminian side of the debate. Sproul does spend significant amounts of time articulating the non-Reformed positions on the "five points of Calvinism", but he doesn't present them in as charitable a light as he could. I'm not well-read on Arminianism, but I don't think he presented their strongest arguments either - he never mentioned the Arminian concept of "prevenient grace". I understand that he's making a case for Reformed theology, but his failure to present the opposing side's best arguments suggests that he can't defeat them.

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### **Harold Cameron says**

"Understanding the Basics"

"What do the "five points" of Calvinism really mean?"

Perhaps you've heard of Reformed theology, but you're not certain what it is. Some references to it have been positive, some negative. It appears to be important, and you'd like to know more about it. But you 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 you through the foundations of the Reformed Doctrine and explain 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." (From the Baker Books Website).

**About the Author:** Dr. R. C. Sproul is the author of more than sixty books, the founder and chairman of Ligonier Ministries, and a professor of systematic theology and apologetics at Know Theological Seminary in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

**My Thoughts About the Book:** I would refer to this book as a Christian layman's primer as to what Reformed Theology is and what it isn't. In his well-written and easy to read and understand book, Dr Sproul clearly explains what the "Foundations of Reformed Theology or "Covenant Theology" (as it is sometimes called) are, and "What The Five Points of Reformed Theology are. And the five points are Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints - sometimes referred to as TULIP. In his book Dr. Sproul relies heavily on the Word of God as well as the writings of Reformed Theologians such as John Calvin, "the father of Calvinism," Martin Luther, J. I. Packer and others to educate us as to just what the Reformed Theology is. And throughout the book there are many helpful illustrations as well to aid us so that we can gain a greater understanding of the Theology.

When it comes to matters of religion and philosophy many high-minded, over educated men try to make it out to be something more difficult to understand than it need be - like it were rocket science or something. But Dr. Sproul, who is very highly educated and would be considered by many to be one of the world's foremost scholars when it comes to the Word of God and Theology, stays to a plain and simple course of explaining Reformed Theology so ordinary people like me can get it. And because of this book I can say I got it...and you can too if you are confused about Reformed Theology. So, if you are new to the faith and the theological scene, or are growing in your faith as a young believer or are a seasoned member of the household of faith there is something to be learned by all in this book about Reformed Theology.

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### **Brian says**

All my life I've been taught to reject the teachings of this book. On July 17, 2009, at work, I truly trusted in Christ to save me. Now after having studied Romans, chapters three to eleven, every day since the day of my conversion, I see the Bible truly teaches what R.C. Sproul has written here. I've struggled to let go of religion and salvation by works ever since. Only love and faith remain. All else is vanity.

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### **Rachel says**

Excellent, excellent book! Even better than I had anticipated. Topics covered: what are the distinctives of reformed theology?, faith alone, Scripture alone, covenant theology, and the five points of Calvinism.

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### **Rob says**

This is the best summary of Reformed doctrine that I have read. It explains in clear language the Reformed faith and I HIGHLY RECOMMEND it to anyone wishing a study of the basics of the Christian faith. This book will challenge you to search the Truth of God by examining Scripture. This is not an all-encompassing exposition but a great start to discovering Truth.

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### **George Parker says**

This book, as indicated by the title, covers the basics of Reformed theology. Sproul's book is a little more technical than Horton's book 'Putting Amazing Back Into Grace', in that Sproul sprinkles Latin theological terms throughout; however, he always explains them and includes a glossary of foreign terms at the back of the book. This is a solid book that sketches covenant theology and the 5-points of Calvinism.

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### **Neil Verner says**

An excellent book by Dr Sproul, which not only helped answer many of my questions regarding reformed theology but also changed my life. My entire understanding of God His sovereignty in Salvation was challenged and developed. I would highly recommend this volume to anyone like myself who had misunderstandings regarding this controversial subject.

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