The meaning and history of “Reformation”

Introduction

The term “Reformed” first arose in the sixteenth century to define those churches which were reorganized according to theological principles that distinguished them from the Roman Catholic church. At that time, the complete name was “churches that are Reformed on the basis of Scripture.” Since then the shortened form “Reformed” has become part of the official designation of numerous churches around the world. Generally speaking, these churches promote the doctrines that were rediscovered during the age that is labelled “Reformation.” In calling themselves Reformed, churches declare that they share with the sixteenth-century churches the Bible as the foundation for their essence and structure. As one generation replaces another, however, the connection between the first manifestation of the name “Reformed” and its current one threatens to be weakened. Therefore it behooves us to know how the name came about, and what it means. It is the purpose of this article to relate briefly how the words “Reformed” and “Reformation” originated, and how they are used today. We shall begin with the biblical concept of reform, and then examine the meaning of “Reformation” in the Middle-Ages and sixteenth century. Thereupon we shall consider the significance of the name “Reformed churches,” before giving an explanation of “Reformation” and related historical terms. In conclusion, we shall make some observations about the value of knowing the meaning of these terms today.

Biblical reform

The Latin verb “reformare,” from which the English word derives, occurs only twice in the Latin translation of the Bible. The concept of reform, however, is a biblical one, and appears throughout the Old and New Testament. True reformation is an act of God whereby in his covenant love He directs his people back to his Word and to the proper worship of Him. In the Bible it is made clear that return to Scripture and proper service are the main components of reformation. One could give several examples of reformation recorded in the Bible, but three will have to suffice:

1. the reforms of Asa (2 Chronicles 14) based on the laws and commandments of God and consisting in a return to true worship;
2. the rediscovery of the Book of the Law during the reign of Josiah (2 Chronicles 34-35) and the proper keeping of the Passover;
3. the reforms recorded in Nehemiah 8, where the Law is read, the covenant is reaffirmed, and the Sabbath-day worship is restored.

True reformation, then, occurs when God directs believers to his Word and the right worship of Him. The reformation of the sixteenth century, we may say, was a reformation of this kind. As a theological term, then, reformation means reinstatement of proper service to God that is based on Scripture.

The Bible stresses that reform comes not by the instigation of great doers or thinkers, but by the grace of God. It is not for the glory of man but for the glory of God’s Holy name that He causes reformation. In Nehemiah we read that God brings about changes in order that He may make his name dwell among his people again (Nehemiah 1:9). In Ezekiel 36 we read that God will cause his people to walk according to his statutes. Verse 23 states: “It is not for your sake, O Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my Holy Name which you have profaned among the nations.” Thus the goal of reform among God’s people is the restoration of God’s holy name. Also the sixteenth century reformation was an act of God to restore the glory of his name. Not unlike the prophets in ancient Israel, the reformers knew that they were no more than “unworthy servants” who performed the duties assigned by their Master.
During the Middle-Ages the word “reformation” was used commonly in the realms of law, society, and church. For example, amendments and applications of legal regulations were labelled “reformations.” In social life the term meant renewal, or revival of lost values. In the church, “reformation” meant institutional change; often such change occurred following a decision of a Council. Several popes attempted to make changes within the church, and already during the twelfth century it became possible for ecclesiastical reforms to be enacted without the approval of the state.

As time passed, it became clear that the church needed to be reformed completely, from the top down. To use the phrase of the time, the church required renovation “in head and in members.” Accordingly, Pope Innocent III convened the Fourth Lateran Council in order to “reform the universal church.” Due to internal and external opposition, however, changes were difficult to enact. Nevertheless, the notion that the structures of church and state required correction was being accepted widely between 1400 and 1500. Out of these medieval sentiments grew the conviction of the sixteenth-century reformers that renovation based on the Bible was required. We must appreciate this continuity in the history of ideas if we wish to understand many aspects of the Reformation.

“Reformation” in the sixteenth century

It is not yet clear whether or not the term “reformation” became more limited in meaning and use at the turn of the sixteenth century. Most students of the period think that the broad sense of “renewal” used in the medieval period remained. Whatever the case, the reformers themselves did not invent the term to describe the developments in which they were involved. They used various expressions for the changes they advocated. For example Erasmus, whose role at the dawn of the Reformation is often undervalued, spoke of conversion and repentance, whereby he stressed that true reform begins in the heart of individuals. Martin Luther rarely used the word “reformation.” At first he applied it to proposed changes in regulations governing universities; so that the modern, humanist methods of study might be fostered, bylaws had to be amended. When he published the famous theses in 1517, Luther did not envisage that a total break with the Roman church would occur; he merely intended to provoke academic debate with fellow priests. He did not know that October 31 would be considered the start of the Reformation.

Luther’s call for renewal was based on deep theological convictions, however, and these convictions became the basis for the formation of a renewed church. It soon became clear that the rediscovery of long-lost biblical teachings would have significant consequences. Contemporary and later thinkers agreed that Luther’s theology of the cross entailed rejection of many medieval teachings and practices that had no grounds in Scripture: the authority of the pope, monastic vows, veneration of Mary and other saints, pilgrimages, indulgences, etc. Thus the term “reformation” developed into meaning something more extensive and more precise than it did earlier. Already by 1518, Luther himself used the word in the ecclesiastical sense of total renewal of the church. For this reason some theologians today use the word “reformation” to refer to the consequences implied by Luther’s discovery of certain biblical doctrines.

“Radical Reformation”

The word “reform” became popular in part because the reformers insisted that the alterations they advocated were really no more than changes to the structure (“form”) of the existing church. They were merely reshaping the church on the basis of biblical doctrine; they were not promoting a total rejection of the church. The Roman church, however, portrayed the reformers as radicals who were separating themselves from the “catholic” church, the church of all times and places. It is for this reason that the writings of the reformers are replete with citations of the church fathers; one cannot understand the Reformation well unless, like the reformers themselves, one is steeped in the writings of Jerome, Augustine, and others who served the church between 200 and 500 A.D. Even today, churches that are truly Reformed proclaim their identity with the church of all ages.

During the sixteenth century there were groups, however, which advanced a complete break with the catholic church, and with political structures. While the magisterial reformers hoped to convince the governing authorities to adopt their proposals, there were many sectarians for whom opposition to political powers was a key part of the platform. Three groups have been identified as belonging
to this left wing of the Reformation: Anabaptists, spiritualists, and evangelicals. These groups formed no unified movement, but did share a number of characteristics, such as rejection of church organization, an appeal to the individual, and a desire to restore pristine Christianity. In a sense, then, these dissident movements were more fundamental than those linked to Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin. Hence modern historians often refer to these groups as belonging to the “Radical Reformation,” which lasted from 1518 to 1580.

“Reformed churches”

Although Lutherans referred to the period ushered in by the publication of Luther’s theses as the “reformation,” the term “reformed” was not employed in Germany during the 1520s to identify congregations implementing change. At that time, the word “protestant” was applied to them. In 1529, at the Diet of Speyer, several south German cities submitted an official declaration in which they objected to the decision to reinstate Roman authorities, orders, and practices in places where reform had been implemented. While today “protest” has the negative connotation of opposition or objection, in the sixteenth century the Latin word “protestari” had the positive meaning “to profess, to witness.” It referred to the public expression of the consciences of those who believed that the reforms which had been implemented were based on the will of God. The term fell out of use during the latter part of the sixteenth century, when different entities emerged as a result of opposing views, and it was not until the nineteenth century that “Protestantism” became popular as an umbrella name for the various churches that had separated from the Roman one.

It was in Switzerland and France that the phrase “reformed church” (église réformé) was first used to identify those congregations which were experiencing doctrinal and ecclesiastical renovation. During the 1540s, more and more congregations described themselves as “reforming on the basis of Scripture” – while the Roman church depicted them as belonging to a faith that merely “claimed to be reformed” (religion prétendue réformée). However it is viewed, the word “reformed” referred to the doctrinal foundation of these congregations. It was imported by Huguenots into the Netherlands, where it was adopted quickly. It is from this time and place that many Reformed churches derive their current name. And the significance in this name should not be forgotten today: modern Reformed churches are not grounded in the ideas of the sixteenth-century Reformation, but share with the churches of that time a common biblical foundation.

In the first place, then, “reformed” points to the theological basis of the churches that are so called. The teachings of justification by faith alone, by God’s grace alone, etc., are defining characteristics of Reformed denominations today as well as of those in the sixteenth century. Similarly, these churches share the consequences of these doctrines in their manner of worship and communion. One example will have to suffice to show that “Reformed” concerns especially teaching and practice. During the sixteenth century it was the controversy over the physical presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper that helped to give the word “Reformed” a theological sense. For when John Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli’s successor, expressed agreement over the issue by signing the Zurich Agreement (Consensus Tigurinus) in 1549, a “Reformed” understanding of the sacrament became clearer and distinguished itself from the Lutheran one. From that time onward, there was increasing clarity about the features that identify the Reformed faith. In the latter part of the sixteenth century, then, “Reformed” was used increasingly for churches linked to Calvinism. Lutheran churches were distinguished occasionally from Roman Catholic by means of the same name, however, and to be clear about which reformation they speak, some historians use the phrase “Calvinist Reformation” for changes in those churches throughout Europe that were influenced especially by the reform of the churches at Geneva and Strassbourg and the writings of John Calvin.

“Reformation” as historical term

In English usage, “Reformation” has become a specialized historical term that denotes the development of the Protestant confession and churches in the sixteenth century. From the perspective of universal history, it is a term denoting the specific period in time from 1517 until 1600. Following the publication of German History in the Age of Reformation (1839) by the influential historian Leopold von Ranke, “Reformation” was used widely in identifying this time
period. While it refers especially to the changes which occurred in the church, “Reformation” is not applied to the specific reforms of Zwingli, Knox, or Calvin, but to the whole series of changes which occurred throughout Europe during the sixteenth century. Furthermore, while “Reformation” points in the first place to religious, theological, and ecclesiastical change in the sixteenth century, it is applied now to an increasingly broader range of topics. In recent years historians have examined cultural and social aspects of the time, from trade and economy to demographics and lifestyle. Thus also developments of a secular nature may be referred to as part of the “Reformation.”

Since von Ranke’s time, various phases and stages in the Reformation have been identified and labelled, so that now there are subdivisions in the history of the sixteenth century. For example, the years 1519-1527 have been named the “Early Reformation.” Another common term is “Magisterial Reformation”; it refers to that time and place in which political authorities were advised by masters and teachers of reform. Luther and Zwingli hoped to carry out reform with the co-operation of municipal magistrates. It is a useful specialization, for it points to the political as well as religious dimension in which these reformers worked. Yet another example of the subdivision is the term “Age of Confessionalization,” which points to the time in the late sixteenth century when reforms were encoded in official documents which in turn controlled the direction of many leaders and common people. It was this process of confessionalization which prevented the formation of a single Protestant response to Roman Catholicism, and in fact contributed to the development of concepts such as “Calvinist,” “Evangelical,” or “Lutheran.”

Such divisions and labels within “Reformation” are reserved mainly for specialists in the field, but it is important for the general reader to know that the Reformation era was one that evolved through different phases. The sixteenth century was a time of drastic and rapid changes in politics, social norms, and economics, and the exact historical situation of each reform must be appreciated. What is more, just as the historical context of the reforms matters, so too does the geographical one. Readers will appreciate that the Reformation in England, for example, is marked by unique characteristics. There, the relationship between church and state was much closer than in many places in mainland Europe. The “Dutch Reformation,” to give another example of a geographical determinant, refers to the development of the Reformed faith in the lowlands between 1550 and 1650.

“The Counter-Reformation”

The term “Counter-Reformation” first appeared in the middle of the seventeenth century to depict the efforts in certain reformed regions to return to Roman Catholicism. Used in this way, the term meant reaction or response to the Reformation. The Council of Trent (1545-1563), at which the Romanist church sought to reaffirm the Romanist beliefs and practices, is frequently cited as an instance of counter-reform. More generally, all the attempts of governing authorities between 1550 and 1650 to enforce Roman Catholicism upon their communities were described as examples of the counter-Reformation.

Most modern historians, however, think that the term “Counter-Reformation” may be misleading. One reason why they are abandoning it is that in many cases it was applied to a process that was not consciously anti-Reformed in motivation or nature. Rather, they suggest, the many alterations implemented by the Roman church were the result of a positive development that had begun well before the sixteenth century, and so were not reactionary. Recall the concept of reform in the Middle-Ages, as discussed above. Another reason why the term “Counter-Reformation” is falling into disuse is that it was perceived as having negative connotations: counter-reform means opposed to reform. Since the term had a negative flavour, “Counter-Reformation” seemed a subject less interesting than the innovations of the Protestant reformers. The unfortunate result of this attitude is that scholarship of the sixteenth century is lopsided towards Protestantism. This imbalance is detrimental to our understanding of the Reformation, which can be understood better when seen in comparison with the Romanist reforms of the time.

“The Catholic Reformation”

Instead of “Counter-Reformation,” historians began to use the abbreviated title (Roman) “Catholic Reformation.” This term certainly has its value, for it depicts the initiatives of the Roman Catholic
Church to make changes whereby it would remain viable. Especially for Italy and Spain, where numerous reforms within the church took place during the sixteenth century, “Catholic Reformation” is a useful name. The term helps to explain why in these countries the Protestant Reformation had little effect, and why Roman Catholicism remained (and remains) generally unchallenged there. As was stated in the previous paragraph, when we understand why and how the Roman Catholic Church developed during the sixteenth century, we gain a better understanding of the reasons why and to what extent the Reformation took place in various European lands. In Poland, for example, resurgent Roman Catholicism prevented the Reformation from becoming institutionalized; consequently, the reforms in that land differed in nature from the changes occurring elsewhere. For the period of change within the Roman church between 1550 and 1650, therefore, the term “Catholic Reformation” remains current.

“Second Reformation”

The latter phase of the Reformation, from 1550-1700, has been called the “Second Reformation.” Some writers use it to define the reforms emanating from Geneva during this period, to distinguish them from the changes promoted by the “first” generation of reformers. Others use “Second Reformation” to denote the period of Pietism in (northern) Germany and the Netherlands, when there was a strong appeal to religious experience. The term has met with its critics, however, and it remains to be seen whether it will stand the test of time. For while it is true that the period 1550-1700 witnessed an emphasis upon some features of the Reformation that had been neglected – such as a stress on individual faith and criticism of church institutions as such – there were no major theological discoveries which produced ecclesiastical reform. In short, critics of the term suggest that the renovations were not significant enough to warrant the term “reformation.”

Conclusion

Modern Reformed churches declare by their name that they have been, and continue to be, reformed by the Word of God. While the term points to the period of Reformation in the sixteenth century, the theological meaning of it implies also that “Reformed” churches are not restricted to maintaining only the reforms that occurred then. In fact, in the old and new dispensation, God repeatedly reformed his church in doctrine and practice. “Reformed” churches therefore declare that they are one with the “catholic” church in acknowledging imperfection and the constant need for change. In the time of the church fathers or the Middle-Ages – not to mention the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – renovations occurred which became part of this one church, and it is imperative that the catholic church know how Christ has governed it throughout history.

During the sixteenth century, however, there occurred a significant reformation, and it remains necessary for modern Reformed churches to appreciate and advance the biblical doctrines whereon the reforms of that age were based. It is important to understand also the teachings and customs of the Romanist church which caused the reformers to promote changes, and to pray and act for its return to biblical truth. Furthermore, the place of the Reformed churches in the context of broader Protestantism should not be forgotten, and we must appreciate why and how it happened that during the sixteenth century different kinds of reformation occurred.

For the modern church it is useful also to evaluate the differences that arose due to social, political, and geographical influences. While the Reformation in Scotland, for example, produced a heritage with features different from the one in Hungary or the Netherlands, there remains for the resulting federations a common basis in the return to the Scriptures and the proper service of God. At the same time we must not exaggerate the importance of the Reformation by elevating it to a status of being definitive or prescriptive. We must remember especially that the hand of God in guiding his church remains active until the fullness of time, and that our duty is to serve Him as “unworthy servants.”

R Faber

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