

God's Joy Project

A Short Introduction to Reformed
Theology & A Discussion Guide to
Tony Reinke's Book *The Joy Project*

prepared by Benjamin Vrbicek

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Benjamin Vrbicek blogs regularly at www.fanandflame.com.

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What is Reformed Theology?

A Short Introduction

When I was in college a guest speaker from Reformed University Fellowship came to speak to our Bible study in the athletic department. After he had been introduced by our leader, someone in the study asked the speaker what it meant to be reformed. It seemed like a good question to ask. His campus ministry, after all, was called Reformed University Fellowship. The pastor looked over at the person who introduced him, shrugged, and then looked back at us. He said something like, “I’d love to explain it, but I’m not sure this is the place to do that well.” At the time, I thought this was a bit odd. Now I understand why he did this. He was nervous that giving a sound-bite answer could do more harm than good. I am too.

This is why over the next several weeks we’ll be talking about Reformed theology slowly, thoughtfully, and with our Bibles open. We’ll be using Tony Reinke’s book *The Joy Project* as our guide because of the helpful way he engages with the topics.

In his book *Bloodlines: Race, Cross, and the Christian*, author John Piper claims that he loves Reformed theology the way he might love a picture of his wife. The point Piper makes is that he does not love the picture of his wife in and of itself. He doesn’t love ink on paper or pixels on a screen. Rather, he loves the picture because it is an accurate portrayal of the woman he does love. Similarly, when he says, “I love Reformed theology,” Piper means that it reveals God in that “It’s the best composite, Bible-distilled picture of God that [he] has” (p. 130). In short, he doesn’t love doctrines on paper but the God these doctrines describe.

I think this is a helpful way to talk about any doctrine, but especially the doctrines of Reformed theology. Yet here comes that question again:

What is Reformed theology? What is this “Bible-distilled picture of God” Piper is talking about?

I love to answer this question and yet struggle to answer this question. Explaining Reformed theology takes only a few pages, but it can also take libraries. It can take me 15 minutes to introduce in a Sunday school class, but it might take 15 years for someone to embrace. Part of the reason Reformed theology can be so difficult to grasp is because it’s a topic that requires us to have both a broad understanding of redemptive history as well as familiarity with key Bible passages. Without each of these, it’s hard to make much headway.

Regardless, I still love to try to answer this question because I believe a good understanding of Reformed theology can deepen our joy in God. Even as I say this, I’m aware that the study of Reformed theology can cause a good bit of consternation, especially at first. It sure did for me. Though I didn’t know Reformed theology by its name, when I was first considering what it teaches, I once threw John Piper’s book *Future Grace* at my bedroom wall in frustration.

So, I won’t attempt to explain Reformed theology exhaustively here, but let me try to introduce it to you under four headings.

1. Appreciative Heirs of the Reformation

Those who embrace Reformed theology see themselves as heirs of church reforms that took place around the 1500s (and beyond). The Reformation began with the growing desire to show the Roman Catholic Church its errors and make it healthier. In fact, as I write this, many Protestants around the world are preparing to commemorate the 500th anniversary of The Reformation, which is marked by the date

October 31, 1517 when Martin Luther famously nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany.

Eventually, however, what began as an attempt mainly to reform the existing church led to breaking away from the Roman Catholic Church altogether. This split away from the Roman Catholic Church was the birth of Protestant denominations, a split that has resulted in many splinters. And while the proliferation of Christian denominations is in some ways undesirable, those who embrace Reformed theology deeply appreciate the faithful women and men who lived during the Reformation and who worked to reform the church, often at great personal cost. Martin Luther, like every believer, had deep flaws, but God used him and many others in a mighty way.

2. The Five Solas

Reformed theology is committed to the five great *solas* that came out of The Reformation (*sola* is Latin for “alone”). The five solas are:

<i>Sola Scriptura</i>	Scripture Alone
<i>Solus Christus</i>	Christ Alone
<i>Sola Gratia</i>	Grace Alone
<i>Sola Fide</i>	Faith Alone
<i>Soli Deo Gloria</i>	To the Glory of God Alone

In the book *Bloodlines*, Piper weaves the underlying meaning of these individual phrases into one unified meaning with the statement: “God’s justification of sinners is by *grace* alone, through *faith* alone, because of *Christ* alone, to the *glory of God* alone, on the authority of *Scripture* alone” (p. 131).

Not everyone, however, gives a hearty “amen” to this statement. The Reformation solas came over and against what we might call “anti-solas.” These anti-solas were the common teaching of the church before the Reformation, and sadly in many places they are still taught, whether directly or indirectly. The anti-solas might go something like this:

Scripture	<i>plus</i>	church dogma
Christ	<i>plus</i>	his mother, priests, and saints
Grace	<i>plus</i>	the sacraments
Faith	<i>plus</i>	doing good deeds
To God's glory	<i>plus</i>	human ability

Similar to Piper's statement, let me try to weave together these anti-solas into one unifying sentence: "When we seek God through Scripture and church dogma, we can be made right with God only through Christ, his mother, priests, and saints, by trusting in God's grace and the sacraments, as long as we do enough good works alongside our faith."

I hope it's clear that these anti-solas amount to what Paul calls a "different gospel" (Galatians 1:6ff). The anti-solas don't offer us the good news of the finished work of Christ for our salvation. Instead they tell us to try hard and do our best, while strapping on ankle weights. The gospel alone makes us right with God.

3. The Doctrines of Grace

Those who embrace Reformed theology see Scripture teaching what is often called "the five points of Calvinism" or "the doctrines of grace." These doctrines are a way to talk about the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility, especially in salvation.

These points are frequently explained using the acronym TULIP, which stands for:

- Total depravity
- Unconditional election
- Limited atonement
- Irresistible grace
- Perseverance of the saints

No one knows when the acronym was first used, but the grouping of these ideas first occurred in the early 1600s. The story goes like this.

A group of ministers heavily influenced by the teachings of Jacob Arminius drafted a theological document called the Remonstrance, which had five points. (It's from Jacob Arminius that we get the name Arminian, just as we get Calvinist from the name John Calvin.) The five points of the Remonstrance were actually a critique of Calvinistic teachings. Several years later, another group of ministers drafted a Calvinistic response to the Remonstrance, which also had five points. This Calvinistic response is known as The Canons of Dort. For the most part, TULIP uses different vocabulary than the five points of The Canons of Dort, but the ideas are the same.

As we are going to spend dedicated time in the coming weeks discussing each of the five points, I thought it would be helpful in this brief introduction to Reformed theology to simply mention what the acronym stands for and some of its history.

4. Substantial Continuity between the Old and New Testaments?

Timothy Keller and D.A. Carson are the co-founders of The Gospel Coalition, a ministry committed to helping churches faithfully communicate the gospel and train Christian leaders. The ministry considers itself to be “broadly reformed.” In saying they are “broadly reformed,” they are hinting at the differences represented between these two founders, with one being baptistic in his convictions (Carson) and the other Presbyterian (Keller). The same differences are seen in Charles Spurgeon (Baptist) and Jonathan Edwards (Presbyterian). These differences among the broadly reformed illustrate why I put a question mark after the heading for this section; some see a substantial continuity between the Old and New Testaments, and others do not. Let me back up to explain.

Perhaps we could call Christians who embrace Reformed theology in its fullness, “fully Reformed”—that is, those who are Reformed with a capital “R” (Presbyterians might fit into this category). Conversely, we could call those who are not fully reformed, reformed with a lower case “r” (reformed Baptists).

The difference between these two groups has to do with the amount of continuity or discontinuity each group sees between the Old and New Testaments. Presbyterian theology tends to see greater continuity between the testaments (though of course not complete continuity), while reformed Baptist theology tends to see more discontinuity between the testaments (though of course not complete discontinuity).

One specific area in which this plays out is how much continuity each group sees between the people of God in the Old Testament (Israel) and the people of God in the New Testament (the Church). The slight differences here lead each group to have a different understanding of baptism. You were probably aware of the differences between Baptists and Presbyterians over baptism—Presbyterians practice infant baptism and Baptists baptize only adult believers—but you might not have been aware of some of the background that leads to this difference.

God's Joy Project

Of the four aspects (1. Appreciative Heirs of the Reformation, 2. The Five Solas, 3. The Doctrines of Grace, and 4. Substantial Continuity between the Old and New Testaments?) of Reformed theology, *The Joy Project* focuses primarily on number three, an explanation and exultation of TULIP.

Reinke's book is not the only book that does this, of course. The main reason we are using Reinke's book is because of his emphasis on joy. It's not simply a dry lecture about Reformed theology, but rather a celebration of it, which is more in keeping with the way the biblical authors write about how we are saved—beholding the beauty before bemoaning the controversies.

The Joy Project is my favorite book to help us understand God's solution to our spiritual deadness (total depravity); that God's plan for our salvation does not depend upon me and my good works (unconditional election); that on the cross Jesus purchases for me everything I need to be right with him (limited atonement); that God's

grace is so powerful it can overcome all of my rebellion (irresistible grace); and that life with God is worth fighting for every day of our lives, as well as something to which God himself is committed (perseverance of the saints). In short, I like Reinke's book because it shows us how we get increasing and expanding joy—forever.

Group Discussion Questions
for *The Joy Project*
by Tony Reinke

Introduction:

We Must Have Joy

Questions for Discussion

1. On page 1, Reinke writes, “How much of your life is driven by the desire for joy?” What are some “little joys” you have in life, things like pumpkin lattes, sunny spring afternoons, fishing for trout, or buying a new pair of shoes?
2. When you stand in line at the grocery store and see the magazines, is there a way to view their covers as offering different paths to joy? What are some of those paths? (See page 2 for examples.)
3. Perhaps you’ve never thought of your life as the pursuit of joy. Take time to list several major events in your life (graduation,

Act I:

The World's Joy-Tragedy

TULIP Quick Reference Q&A

1. What does "T" stand for?
Total Depravity.
2. Other helpful names?
Pervasive or radical depravity; affectional atheism (per Piper).
3. What does total depravity mean?
Everything about us has been touched by, indeed corrupted by, the fall. When the Bible speaks of us as being spiritually dead, it means we are unable to come to God on our own and that nothing we do can earn his love.

*Piper & Reinke: "Total depravity is not just badness, but blindness to beauty and deadness to joy." **
4. What does it not mean?
Total depravity does not mean we are as "bad" as we possibly could be. "Total" doesn't mean we do every evil we could.
5. Why is it controversial?
It's controversial because the concept of deadness seems too radical. By asserting our inability to perfect ourselves and earn God's love, total depravity assaults our pride. It's also controversial because

* All sentences in this question labeled "Piper & Reinke" come from page 6 of The Joy Project.

people sometimes misunderstand the doctrine to mean that people cannot do anything good.

6. Why is it precious to us?

If apart from Christ we are really, truly spiritually dead and unable to come to God on our own, then it means when God does make us alive—when he does save us—our salvation is a free gift! In short, if salvation depends upon God, not man, then that's a good place to rest our hopes. Also, a robust view of human depravity allows us to not be perpetually frustrated by the failures of humans to perfect ourselves. We do bad things because we are sinners.

7. Key verses?

Genesis 6:5; Jeremiah 17:9; John 3:20–21; Romans 3:9–18, 14:23; and Ephesians 2:1–3.

Questions for Discussion

1. On page 13 Reinke quotes C. S. Lewis: “All that we call human history—money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery—is the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.” Share a hard story from your life when you tried to find happiness apart from God.

2. What are some places in the Bible where we see total depravity dramatized (whether in particular verses or broad narratives)?

2. What emotions does this song evoke in you?

3. What lyrics can you identify with in this song?

Act II:

The Joy Project Designed

TULIP Quick Reference Q&A

1. What does “U” stand for?
Unconditional election.
2. Other helpful names?
God’s predestination or choosing of his people.
3. What does it mean?
Before birth, God chose people to be his children, regardless of anything they would do for him.

Piper & Reinke: “Unconditional election is how God planned, before we existed, to complete our joy in Christ.”
4. What does it not mean?
Unconditional election doesn’t mean we should give up all hopes of sharing the gospel with people because everything has already been decided.
5. Why is it controversial?
Unconditional election is controversial because it leads some people to believe that our actions in this life do not matter. This is a wrong understanding, however, and not at all what the Bible teaches.
6. Why is it precious to us?
It’s good news that my eternal happiness was planned before I was born and doesn’t depend on me. Additionally, rather than the

doctrine of election undercutting our evangelistic zeal, it should give us hope that many will embrace the gospel.

7. Key verses?

Deuteronomy 10:14–15; John 6:35–45, 17:24–26; Romans 9:1–29; Ephesians 1:3–23; Colossians 3:12; 1 Thessalonians 1:4–5; and 2 Thessalonians 2:13.

Questions for Discussion

1. When you hear the word “election,” what do you think of? When you think about election in the context of the Bible, what stories and passages come to mind? What feelings, if any, does the idea of election evoke (e.g., joy, anger, confusion)?

2. Read Hosea 1–3. Were you familiar with this story before? What did you notice as you read it this time? Why is this prophet’s story helpful to consider when talking about unconditional election?

3. Read Revelation 13:7–8. There is a book mentioned in this passage. What is the title of that book? When does the passage say

6. How should the doctrine of unconditional election keep us humble? See Deuteronomy 9:4–6. And how might the doctrine of unconditional election be an encouragement to us, especially in times of suffering?

7. Restate the doctrine of unconditional election in your own words. How could this doctrine encourage you in your Christian life?

Song for Discussion

“Election” by Shai Linne, featuring Willie Will

* * *

1. What makes the genre of rap a wonderful medium to communicate the gospel?

Act III:

The Joy Project Purchased

TULIP Quick Reference Q&A

1. What does “L” stand for?

Limited atonement.

2. Other helpful names?

Particular atonement or definite atonement.

3. What does it mean?

When Jesus died on the cross, he paid the punishment for the sins of all who trust him. As well, Jesus purchases for them the power that makes their salvation not just possible, but actual.

Piper & Reinke: “Limited atonement is the assurance that indestructible joy in God is infallibly secured for us by the blood of Jesus.”

4. What does it not mean?

Limited atonement does not mean that God doesn’t love all people or that the benefits of the cross cannot legitimately be offered to non-Christians in an evangelistic way.

5. Why is it controversial?

Limited atonement is controversial because, to be blunt, there are a number of verses that seem to indicate “Christ died for all” (2 Corinthians 5:19; 1 Timothy 2:6; Hebrews 2:9; 10:29; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 2:2). Many people understand these verses to teach that Jesus

Act IV:

The Joy Project Breaks and Enters

TULIP Quick Reference Q&A

1. What does "I" stand for?
Irresistible grace.
2. Other helpful names?
Effectual grace and inward call. Also, closely associated with the cluster of synonyms of new birth, regeneration, and born again.
3. What does it mean?
God's power to overcome all of our resistance to his love.

Piper & Reinke: "Irresistible grace is the sovereign commitment of God to make sure we hold on to superior delights instead of the false pleasures that will ultimately destroy us."
4. What does it not mean?
Sometimes people take this to mean that we cannot resist God and his grace. We can do this. We all do it. But what irresistible grace actually means is that God can overcome all of our resistance.
5. Why is it controversial?
Irresistible grace is controversial because it means our wills are not free in an absolute sense. It means, to quote the famous poem

“Invictus,” I am not the ultimate “master of my fate . . . the captain of my soul.”

6. Why is it precious to us?

Irresistible grace is precious because it means God can overcome all of my resistance and deadness to true joy.

7. Key verses?

Hosea 2:14; John 6:44, 10:27–29; 12:32; Romans 9:1–29, esp. v. 25; and 1 John 4:19.

Questions for Discussion

1. Are you more often tempted toward pride or despair? Despair often seems more humble, but how are pride and despair related?

2. On pages 68–69 Reinke writes, “The lust for fame and the need to preserve fame are twin traps that cannot sustain life’s meaning or the soul’s pleasure.” Are there areas of your life you can relate to this quote?

Act V:

The Joy Project Unwraps and Unfolds

TULIP Quick Reference Q&A

1. What does “P” stand for?
Perseverance of the saints.
2. Other helpful names?
Preservation of the saints (note the word preservation looks similar to perseverance, but preservation emphasizes God’s sovereign work).
3. What does it mean?
All those who have been genuinely saved will continue believing the gospel until they die.

Piper & Reinke: “Perseverance of the saints is the almighty work of God to keep us, through all affliction and suffering, for an inheritance of pleasures at God’s right hand forever.”

4. What does it not mean?
Some misunderstand the doctrine to mean that whether we keep believing or not, and whether we keep living the Christian life or not, is irrelevant to our final standing before God. This is not what “perseverance of the saints” means. The saying, “once saved, always saved,” doesn’t mean you can “get saved,” but then live a morally bankrupt life, one that is indifferent to God, and then still go to heaven. If they did fall away, perhaps they were never really saved.

5. Why is it controversial?

Perseverance of the saints is controversial because some passages seem to indicate that people can lose their salvation. Plus, we all know people who seemed to have once loved Jesus, but now they don't.

6. Why is it precious to us?

Is it possible to have legitimate assurance that you'll wake up a Christian tomorrow morning? Yes it is. God undertakes within Christians everything needed to keep us trusting him.

7. Key verses?

Matthew 13:1-24; Romans 8:18-27; 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24; Hebrews 12:14; 1 Peter 1:3-9; 1 John 2:19; Jude 24-25; and Revelation 2:7.

Questions for Discussion

1. On page 92 Reinke writes, "We are haunted people. We are fearing people, and our fears don't end in childhood." He then goes on to list several common fears we have. What fears do you identify with in his list?

2. Read Romans 8:18-37. Considering the above question about fear, what are some promises of God mentioned in Romans 8 that address our fears? Where do you see the doctrine of perseverance of the saints in this passage? How is the death of Jesus held out to us as an encouragement that God is "for us"?

Conclusion: What Now?

Questions for Discussion

1. What have been the most encouraging aspects of this study?
2. What have been the most discouraging or confusing?
3. At the start of the study, we asked what feelings you have when you hear phrases such as TULIP, doctrines of grace, and Calvinism, or when you hear Bible teachers such as John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, and John Piper. How have your feelings changed or not changed?

Suggested Resources for Further Study

Books

Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine by Wayne Grudem, especially chapters 16, 24, 27, 32–36, and 40. (Beginner)

Chosen by God by R. C. Sproul (Beginner)

Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God by J. I. Packer (Intermediate)

Five Points: Towards a Deeper Experience of God's Grace by John Piper (Intermediate)

What is Reformed Theology: Understanding the Basics by R.C. Sproul (Intermediate)

The Westminster Confessions of Faith (Intermediate)

The Canons of Dort (Intermediate)

Chosen for Life: The Case for Divine Election by Sam Storms (Advanced)

From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective by David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson (Advanced)

Websites

desiringGod.org (especially the lectures on TULIP)

TheGospelCoalition.org

9Marks.org

“ Anticipating unending joy in the presence of Christ changes everything. It means we can relinquish control over our lives. It means we have no fear of the future. It means all our pressing toward personal holiness is not in vain. God elects so that we will be conformed to the image of Christ, in his holiness and in his happiness. It will be done, and we strive and obey in this inescapable hope.

– From *The Joy Project* by Tony Reinke

BENJAMIN VRBICEK is a teaching pastor at Community Evangelical Free Church in Harrisburg, PA. Benjamin and his wife, Brooke, have six children. He has written for *Desiring God*, *The Gospel Coalition*, and *For The Church*. He is the co-author of *More People to Love* and the author of *Struggle Against Porn* (forthcoming 2018).



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