

REFORMED THEOLOGY FOUNDATION

Foundation

Assigned reading: *What Is Reformed Theology*, R. C. Sproul, pages 9-57 (*Introduction, chapters 1 & 2*)

The Gospel renewal, which in essence began earlier than Martin Luther’s 95 Theses some 500 years ago, was sparked by a renewal of the submission of the mind of mankind to the Bible. Ultimately some began to realize that the Christian has to submit to the Word of God in the Bible. One of the main reasons that Martin Luther’s movement took root and prospered was the translation of the Bible into German so that the common person could encounter the Word of God for himself. The readers of the Bible began to understand why Luther had been vilified by the Roman Church: he challenged the “traditions” of the Roman Church, which had taken on authority equal to the Bible. One of the hallmarks of the renewal was “The Bible Alone” (*sola Scriptura*). The Bible is the authority for all of life and is the source from which our theology comes, and our theology determines our life in all its aspects.

One must decide for himself about the nature of the Bible. A simple way to consider it is with a stark contrast. The Bible is either the “self-revelation” of God written over a period of 1400-1600 years through the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, or it is a compilation of encounters, recollections, speculations, and ideas of men and women concerning their experiences of spirituality or God. There is certainly much space between these two very different proposals, but in reality they are reflective of the two kinds of people living on our planet. To everyone who is not a believer in Jesus Christ, the Bible is considered to be a human document subject to all the vicissitudes of life. To everyone who is a believer in Christ (indwelt by the Holy Spirit), it is “*breathed by God*” (2 Timothy 3:16).

The way one understands the authority of the Bible has direct influence on theology, becoming the “watershed” for our relationship with and response to God. If the Bible is a “human” book, then it has relative authority in relation to other human books. If it is the self-revelation of the true God, then it has the highest authority and stands above human understanding; it is thus ascendant over any human tradition, even ones that claim to be the tradition of the Church. Reformed theology derives its teaching directly from the Bible by submitting itself to continuing “reformation”; the Bible alone corrects or perfects reformed theology. The Essential Tenets of the ECO (Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians) claim the Bible as the sole source for our theology. The Bible is therefore the foundation for all of the ECO’s theological understanding of life.

God's Word: The Authority for Our Confession

The clearest declaration of God's glory is found in His Word, both incarnate and written. The Son eternally proceeds from the Father as His Word, the full expression of the Father's nature, and since in the incarnation the Word became flesh, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are offered to His disciples. The written Word grants us those treasures, proclaims the saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and graciously teaches all that is necessary for faith and life. We glorify God by recognizing and receiving His authoritative self-revelation, both in the infallible Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and also in the incarnation of God the Son. We affirm that the same Holy Spirit who overshadowed the Virgin Mary also inspired the writing and preservation of the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit testifies to the authority of God's Word and illumines our hearts and minds so that we might receive both the Scriptures and Christ Himself aright.

We confess that God alone is Lord of the conscience, but this freedom is for the purpose of allowing us to be subject always and primarily to God's Word. The Spirit will never prompt our conscience to conclusions that are at odds with the Scriptures that He has inspired. The revelation of the incarnate Word does not minimize, qualify, or set aside the authority of the written Word. We are happy to confess ourselves captive to the Word of God, not just individually, but also as members of a community of faith, extending through time and around the globe. In particular, we join with other members of the Presbyterian and Reformed community to affirm the secondary authority of the Book of Confessions as a faithful exposition of the Word of God. (ECO Essential Tenets and Confessional Standards, page 2)

The Bible is a unit and is in its entirety authoritative. The Old Testament is not less authoritative than the New Testament, nor are the "teachings" of the Lord Jesus more authoritative than the rest of the Bible. Jesus' teaching is in direct harmony with the Bible as a whole.

Sovereignty of God in all things

Assigned reading: *What Is Reformed Theology*, R. C. Sproul, chapters 5, 4, & 3 (in that order).

The Triune God we meet in the Bible is the **ONLY** God. There is none other. He is **SOVEREIGN** over all that is seen and unseen.

*8 "Remember this, keep it in mind,
take it to heart, you rebels.*

*9 Remember the former things, those of long ago;
I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me.*

*10 I make known the end from the beginning,
from ancient times, what is still to come.*

*I say, 'My purpose will stand,
and I will do all that I please.'*

ISAIAH 46:8-10 (NIV)

His sovereignty is expressed in "covenant" throughout the Bible. He is the King of the universe and beyond it to things unseen in eternity. The Old and New Covenants are simply parts of the whole which describe God's way with the universe and His creatures.

God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, is the covenant-keeper in God's plan of salvation. He says throughout John's gospel that what He sees his Father do, He does; what he hears his Father say, He says; He and the Father are one; and on the cross of Calvary, the

work His Father had sent to accomplish was finished. The Father accepts the covenant work of salvation accomplished by His Son on behalf of sinners who are dead in trespasses and sin and thus deserve eternal death for their cosmic rebellion. God accepts Jesus' substitutionary death for us as payment for our sinful rebellion, and He imputes to us, through the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit, the righteousness of Jesus, who completely obeyed God, earning salvation. We are "credited" with Jesus' righteousness and then called to live like Jesus. Repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ alone are the demands of God for salvation. There is no other way of salvation, and there is no other name by which salvation comes: *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved* (Acts 4:12).

Doctrines of Grace

Assigned reading: *What Is Reformed Theology*, R. C. Sproul, chapters 6 & 7, pages 117-161

The ECO Essential Tenets highlight the theology of the reformation in its general scope regarding the authority of the Bible, the radical repudiation of God's Law expressed in the "raised fist" sinfulness of humankind resulting in our spiritual death, and the unique person and work of Jesus Christ, including His Word, disciple-making, suffering, death, and resurrection. It also reminds us that He will return to finalize redemption over His realm.

There are doctrines that set apart reformed believers from other evangelicals of the reformation. Some deal with the understanding of the "covenant" and others with the issue of "ecclesiology" (church government). Those that are highlighted in this section of our course deal with the heart of the gospel and are biblical in all respects.

The doctrines which Luther and Calvin espoused early in the reformation of the Church have often been misunderstood, misquoted, and vilified by those who hold to a broad "evangelical" theology. The first of those doctrines is the foundation stone for the rest of these precious "doctrines of grace." The radical corruption of the human race (total depravity or total inability) must be understood and taught in order to understand the doctrines that flow from it. There are essentially three distinct views of the effects of sin upon the nature of human kind. The reading assigned will explain the differences and how these views relate to understanding all facets of the Christian faith. The remaining "doctrines of grace" will also be elucidated in the assigned reading. Come ready to discuss these precious "doctrines of grace" this week.

Gospel THEOLOGY

**How great is the love the
Father has lavished on us,
that we should be called
children of God!**

1 John 3:1

**...how shall we escape
if we ignore such a great
salvation?**

Hebrews 2:3

THE BAD NEWS

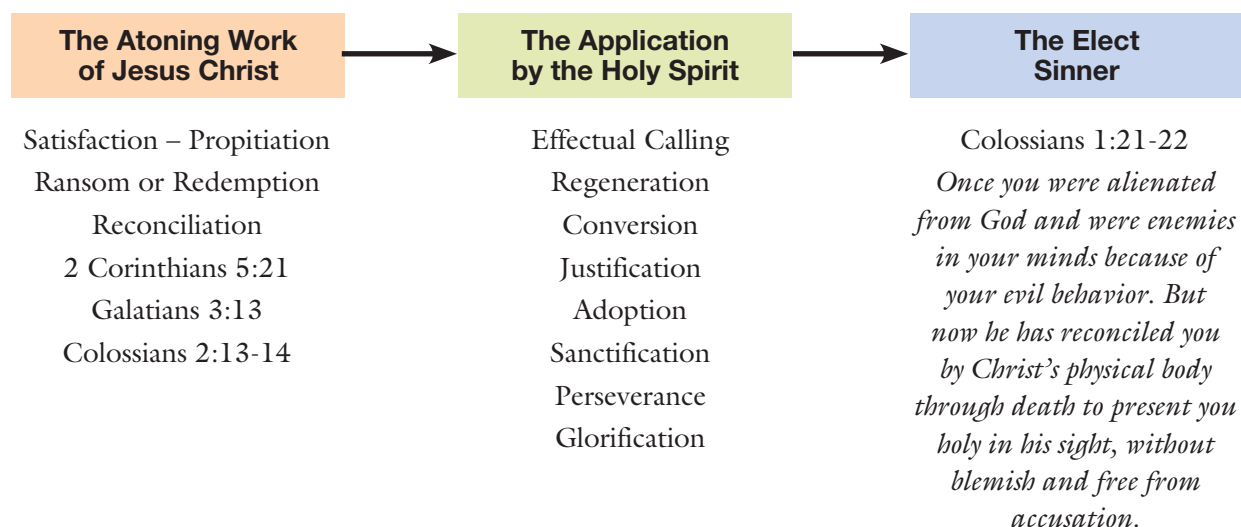
Our Condition	SPIRITUALLY DEAD	
<p><i>And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.</i></p> <p><i>(Ephesians 2:1-3)</i></p>	<p><i>There is none righteous, not even one;</i></p> <p><i>There is none who understands,</i></p> <p><i>There is none who seeks for God;</i></p> <p><i>All have turned aside, together they have become useless;</i></p> <p><i>There is none who does good, There is not even one...</i></p> <p><i>There is no fear of God before their eyes.</i></p> <p><i>(Romans 3:10-12,18)</i></p>	<p><i>But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.</i></p> <p><i>(I Corinthians 2:14)</i></p>

THIS SPIRITUAL CONDITION IS CALLED TOTAL DEPRAVITY.

- Man cannot do the good.
- Man cannot understand the good.
- Man cannot desire the good.

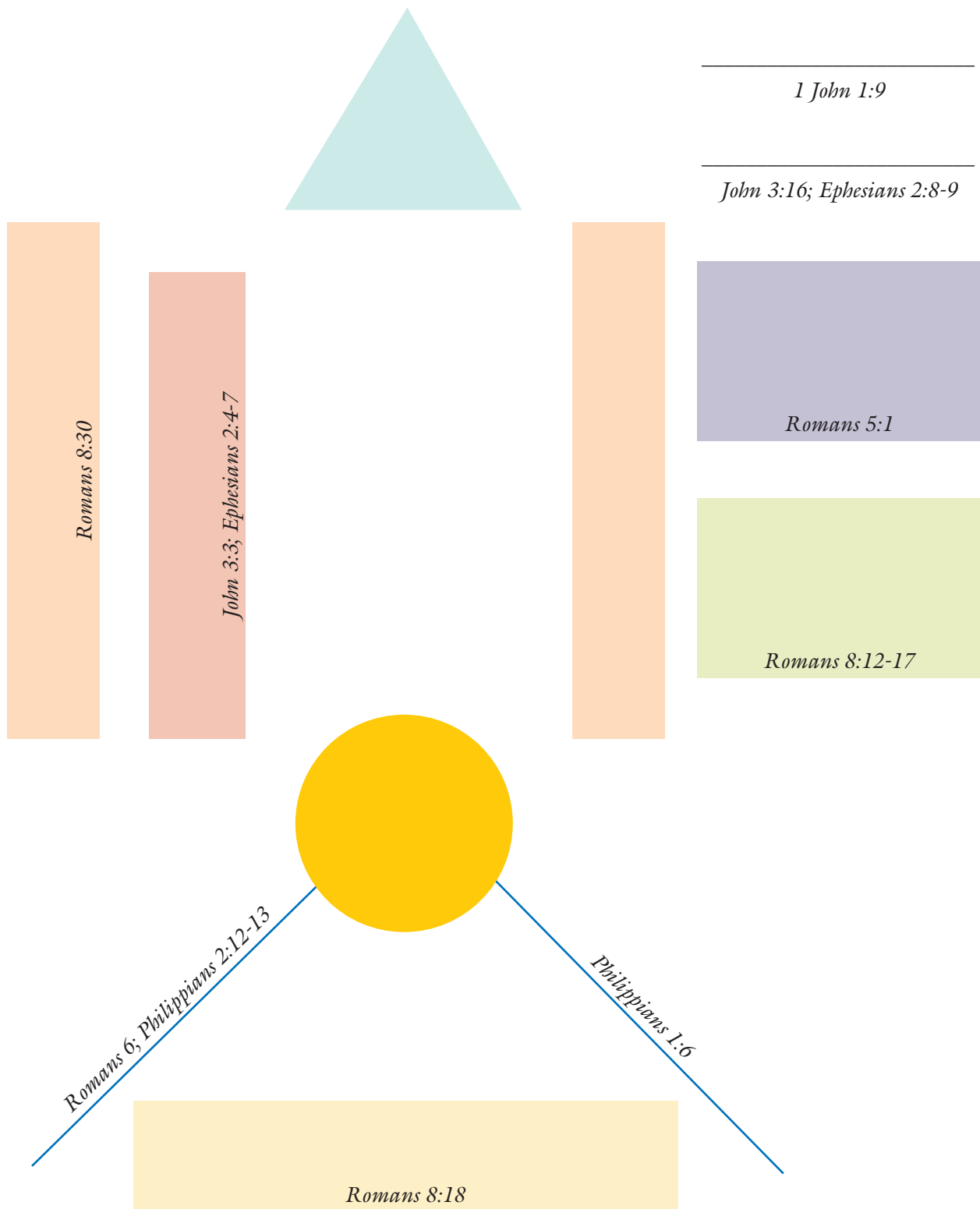
THE GOOD NEWS: ORDER OF SALVATION (Ordo Salutis)

The “ordo salutis” is the order of the application of the redemption accomplished by Christ to God’s elect people.



**“The conversion of a soul is the miracle of a moment.
The manufacture of a saint is the task of a lifetime.”**

Alan Redpath, late pastor of Moody Memorial Church



EFFECTUAL CALLING

An act of God's grace wherein the elect are effectively called into the fellowship of Christ by the Holy Spirit

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. (Romans 8:29-30)

- A. Two Types of Calls
 1. Outward
 2. Inward (Effectual)
- B. The Nature of the Effectual Call
 1. Gracious
 2. Efficacious
 3. Immutable

REGENERATION

The implantation of a new life principle from which all the other spiritual graces flow

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." (John 3:3)

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. (Ephesians 2:4-5)

- A. Other Designations
 1. Born Again
 2. Made Alive
- B. Results
 1. Spiritual Life
 2. New Ability
 3. Freedom from Bondage to Sin

CONVERSION

Another name for repentance and faith

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

- A. Repentance—the response of turning from sin to God. The sinner truly grieves over his sinful nature and turns to God in obedience.
 1. Genuine Sorrow
 2. Turning Away (Change of Direction)
- B. Saving Faith—the complete commitment of self to Christ alone for salvation
 1. Knowledge
 2. Conviction
 3. Trust

JUSTIFICATION

An act of God's free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ... (Romans 5:1)

- A. An Act of God's Grace
- B. Two Results
 - 1. Forgiveness of Sins
 - 2. Imputation of Christ's Righteousness
- C. The Grounds of Justification
- D. The Instrument of Justification

ADOPTION

A judicial act wherein the redeemed are declared part of the family of God and are given the rights, privileges, and nature that accompany this new status

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. (Romans 8:15-16)

- A. Christ's Name Put upon Us
- B. Receive the Spirit of Adoption
- C. Given Access to the Throne of Grace
- D. Enabled to Cry, "Abba, Father"
- E. Cared for by the Father
- F. Sealed to the Day of Redemption
- G. Inherit the Promises

SANTIFICATION

The work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.

In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. (Romans 6:11-12)

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. (Philippians 2:12-13)

- A. A Process of Growth
- B. The Agent of Sanctification
- C. Some Means of Growth

PERSEVERANCE

Those called by God are kept by God

...being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:6)

- A. God's Activity
- B. Those Who "Fall Away"
 - 1. The Prodigal
 - 2. Those Who Were Never Regenerated

GLORIFICATION

The final state of the believer when glorified with Christ

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. (Romans 8:18)

- A. The Destruction of Death
- B. The Future State

DOCTRINE OF CHURCH SACRAMENTS AND POLITY

THE CHURCH AND THE SACRAMENTS

THE CHURCH

The doctrine of the application of the merits of Christ leads us logically to the doctrine of the Church, for the Church consists of those who are in Christ and have received the blessings of salvation, together with their children. The word most commonly used for the Church in the New Testament is “*ekklesia*,” which roughly means “**the called ones.**” The Old Testament word “*kahal*” also is rooted in the word, meaning “called by God.” In the Old Testament this term is used with reference to Israel (Joshua 8:35; Ezra 2:65; Joel 2:16). If this is the right understanding of the Church—those called by God—then the Church did not start in the New Testament. Since Abraham is the patriarch of Israel, the one called by God to begin His special people, we may understand the calling of Abraham as the beginning of an unbroken line of persons called to covenant with God (the Church). Others may contend that the Church started even earlier, with Adam and the covenant of grace. In any case, it is clear the Church originated in the Old Testament, and goes back further than the calling of Christ’s disciples or Pentecost.

The Reformation thinkers changed the emphasis in the concept of the Church. The change is reflected in a sign at Des Peres Presbyterian Church in St. Louis County, one of the oldest churches west of the Mississippi River. The sign says “1833 Meeting House/Des Peres Presbyterian Church.” The sign is an acknowledgment that the building is a meeting house, not the church. The church is the people who are the community of saints. The Catholic Church tended to emphasize the externals of the Church and saw the Church first as the mother of believers. Protestants have tended to emphasize the spiritual aspect of the Church as the community of believers, and the result of God’s work, not the source of it.

THE CHARACTER OF THE CHURCH

The Church as Organism and Organization. The Church is also both organism and organization. Paul compares the Church to a body made up of different cells and organs (1 Corinthians 12). In this respect the Church is a living and breathing organism made up of different members. However, there is organization to the Church, just as there is organization to a living being. It is this organization that makes the Church an institution, which is a means to God’s end, the growth of the community of faith.

The Militant and Triumphant Church. The Church and all its members in the present age are engaged in a struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. However, the Church is assured that Christ has already secured the victory in the end, and the Church militant will therefore also be the Church triumphant.

The “Catholic” Church. The word “catholic” simply means “universal.” All believers in Christ as Savior make up the universal Church. What we know as the Roman Catholic

Church derives its name, and to a certain degree its polity (governmental forms), from the Church that developed under the rule and reign of the Roman Empire. It was the only Church (universal) that existed during the first thousand years after the ascension of Christ. It suffered a division in the middle of the 11th century AD as the continuing demise of the Western Roman Empire was felt in the eastern part of the empire. The Eastern Orthodox Church (eastern form of the Catholic Church) arose and took on shape and life.

The Reformation, which primarily originated in the western Church (Roman Catholic), began a fragmentation of the western Church into Protestants (those who protested the abuses of the accrued “traditions” of the Roman Catholic Church and sought to “reform” the Church) and those loyal to all that had evolved in the life and practice of the Roman Catholic Church (western Church). There were eventually three major facets to the Protestant movement. There was the **Lutheran**, championed primarily by Martin Luther; the **Reformed**, championed primarily by Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and John Knox; and the **Anabaptist**, those who desired not to be tied directly to the civil government and whose views of covenant theology differed distinctly from their Lutheran and Reformed brothers and sisters.

THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH

When the Church began to fragment during the Reformation period, the Reformers felt it appropriate to point out some marks by which a true Church could be distinguished from a false church. Generally, three marks of a true Church were recognized: (1) the true preaching of the Word; (2) the right administration of the sacraments; and (3) the faithful exercise of discipline.

1. **The true preaching of the Word** for the Protestant Reformers found its foundation in the Bible being translated into the vernacular of the people. The Roman Catholic Church had essentially denied the common people access to the Bible (God’s Word written) by insisting that the Latin Bible was the only “authorized” version and that the worship of the Church was to be solely conducted in the Latin language. Luther’s success in reformation was largely due to his translation of the Bible into the German language. Thus when he or others preached and conducted worship, the people were able to understand and assess the teaching of their pastors.
2. **The right administration of the sacraments.** The Roman Catholic Church insisted on seven sacraments and that the “faithful” would improve upon their baptism (when the infant, the Church taught, received the Holy Spirit) and would add to their merit in terms of salvation. The Protestant believers reacted to the abuses that accrued in the Roman Catholic system of sacramentalism and insisted, on the whole, that the only sacraments Christ Jesus “authorized” were baptism and communion (the Lord’s Supper).
 - a. Primarily the Reformers rejected the Roman Catholic view that baptism conferred the Holy Spirit to the person and that the act itself had the effect of making the receiver a Christian who then had to “improve on his baptism accruing merit through the proper use of the sacraments and the acquisition of merit either by his own works or dependence upon saints.” The Reformers taught that baptism was a *seal of grace*, not the effectual conveyor of it. They taught that baptism is not efficacious in itself, but only a *sign* of the inward work of the Holy Spirit not bound by the time of administration.

b. The Reformers rejected the Mass (Holy Eucharist as practiced in the Roman Catholic faith) since to them it purported to be a re-sacrifice of the Lord Jesus and a denial of the once-for-all reality of Christ's sacrifice. They rejected the doctrine of "transubstantiation" in which the elements of the sacrament were presented as the actual body and blood of the Savior. The Reformers taught that the elements were symbolic and that true grace was conveyed by the Holy Spirit in worship. The three branches of the reformation ultimately diverged from one another on minute points of interpretation concerning the nature of the elements of the sacrament and the nature of the worship associated with it.

3. The faithful exercise of discipline is borne out of the commission of Christ Jesus given to His Apostles in Matthew 28. They were to follow His Word, ways, and works as His "disciples" (learners who are disciplined and taught to be like their master) by training (discipling) faithful followers to be like the Master Jesus, who demonstrated His adherence to His Father's Word, ways, and works. Unfortunately, this broader understanding of "discipline" became narrower in its application as to the behavior of followers of Christ, often according to accepted mores of the Church rather than the demonstration of the "discipleship" of Jesus to His Father's Word, ways, and works.

THE MEANS OF GRACE

Fallen men receive blessings from God. Some of these blessings are available to all men, saved and unsaved. God's blessings include the benefits of nature, employment, the harvest, arts and sciences, charitable causes, and good government. God causes the rain to fall on both the just and the unjust. God has operated to provide material blessings and restrain sin. **The blessings of God available to all men are referred to as *common grace*.** All of us know people who are not believers, but who have high moral standards. All men have some sense of right and wrong, of the need for truth. This is the operation of common grace. Christians frequently degrade the value of charitable work outside the Church, such as works promoting medical care, research, and the arts, since they do not provide salvation. What a misunderstanding of God's common grace!

However, there are also blessings available that result in salvation and strengthen those who have received salvation, means by which God works in our hearts and lives. **These blessings connected to salvation are referred to as *special means of grace*.** They include the Word and the sacraments.

A small digression is in order here. The terms "common grace" and "special grace" are not used in Scripture. Not all theologians agree on the means of special grace. Some include prayer and the Church among the means of special grace. But even if there is not universal agreement on particulars, common grace and special grace are helpful terms, in that they help us to remember and give thanks for God's blessings to us, and help us to be vigilant to take advantage of the means God has provided to strengthen our relationship with Him.

THE WORD AS A MEANS OF GRACE

What do we mean by saying that the Word and the sacraments are a means of grace? First of all, let us make it clear that of themselves, they are ineffective. **They become efficacious, or productive—that is, they work—only through the operation of the Holy Spirit.** Baptism does not work just because water is poured on someone—it takes the Holy Spirit working through the act. The Lord's Supper will not work just

because you eat bread and drink wine, but it works because the Holy Spirit works through the act. People are not converted and do not grow in faith just because the Word is preached, but because the Holy Spirit works through the preaching. But the Word and sacraments are means of grace because God has chosen and ordained them as special ways through which the Spirit will work. Christ has officially instituted these in the Church as means by which the Holy Spirit works and confirms faith in the hearts of men.

What is the relationship between the Word and the sacraments? Historically, the Roman Catholic Church has given more prominence to the sacraments than to the Word. The Roman Catholic Church has considered the sacraments to be the real means of grace, and there has been little relationship between the Word and sacraments. Luther shifted the emphasis from the sacraments to the Word and gave prominence to the Word as God's primary means of grace. He pointed out that the sacraments required explanation from the Word, and in fact, the sacraments served to make the Word visible.

In the Reformed faith, we believe that God's grace is most usually communicated to us through Word and sacraments; therefore, the willful neglect of hearing the preached Word or participating in the sacraments can mean only our spiritual loss. You can verify this for yourself. If a person persistently misses sitting under the preached Word, and if that person consistently fails to partake of the Lord's Supper, you will observe the spiritual life of that person diminishing. It is difficult to live a fruitful Christian life by yourself or apart from the Church. We also believe that Word and sacrament go together. The sacraments need the Word because they are visible demonstrations of what the Word says, and the Word needs the sacraments because they are visual illustrations of the Word.

1. The Preached Word. What do we mean when we say the Word is a special means of grace? When we speak of the Word as a means of grace, we are not talking about the Bible. It is true that the Bible is used by the Holy Spirit for the growth and extension of the Church, and the Spirit uses Scripture to edify and nourish the believer. It is also true that the written Word is often used by the Holy Spirit to convict sinners. However, when we talk about the Word as a means of grace, technically and strictly speaking, we are talking about the Word as it is preached, or the **preached Word**. Preaching the Word is a divine commission given by Christ. This does not mean in a general sense that the Bible is not a means of grace. As it is read and studied and taught and communicated, the Spirit works through it. But in a very special way, ordained by Christ, the preaching of the Word is more powerful than a two-edged sword. This is what Paul means in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians when he talks about the foolishness of preaching being the wisdom of God.

2. Law and Gospel. The preached Word is a means of special grace. But we have to go on to say that there are two parts to this preached Word, the Law and the Gospel. Some might think of the Old Testament as being the Law and the New Testament as being the Gospel, but that is not true. God is gracious in all his dealings with Israel in the Old Testament, and Jesus is tougher than the Mosaic Law in the Sermon on the Mount. Both Law and Gospel are found throughout Scripture.

What is the Law? **The Law is anything in Scripture that reveals God's will in the form of a prohibition or a command.** The Law reveals to us the bad

news that we are sinners and cannot be justified on the basis of our own works according to the Law. *What is the Gospel?* **The Gospel proclaims the redeeming love of God in Jesus reconciling us to God.** It is the Good News. Each of these two—the Law and the Gospel—is present in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. Each has its proper function. The Law seeks to awaken sorrow for sin in our hearts. The Gospel seeks to awaken faith in Jesus in our hearts. We need both. Good news isn't good without the bad news. And the bad news without good news is just depressing. Perhaps you have heard people say we don't need the Law of God, or that we are under grace and not law. In a sense that is true, but that does not mean the Law is no longer useful. We need it to awaken our awareness of our sin when we fall short of it. But it is also a guide to the believer, a rule of life, which reminds us of our duty to God and leads us in the way of salvation. We are not saved by our obedience to the Law, but we are convicted of sin and drawn to salvation based on the Law—and the Law guides our sanctification. The Law is our teacher and guide.

The Sacraments as Means of Grace

What is a sacrament? As with several other terms we have used, the word is not found in the Bible. The Westminster Confession says, **“Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace.** They were instituted by God along with the covenant to represent Christ and his benefits, to confirm our position with and in him, to demonstrate a visible difference between those who belong to the church and the rest of the world, and solemnly to engage believers in the service of God in Christ according to his word...” (Westminster Confession, chapter 27, paragraph 1).

What is meant by “signs and seals”? A *sign* points to something, describes something, and is a shorthand reminder of something. In this case, the sacraments point us to and remind us of God's work. A seal guarantees the authority, authenticity, and validity of the document sealed. The sacraments remind us of God's authority exercised through the Church.

How does a sacrament provide grace? As we have said, **the power and effectiveness of the sacrament are derived from the work of the Holy Spirit.** There is no power in the outward ritual. In fact, Paul says that if we partake of the Lord's Supper unworthily, without recognizing the body of the Lord, we are guilty of sin and bring judgment on ourselves (1 Corinthians 11:27-32). The outward or visible part of the sacrament signs and seals an inner work. Therefore, the effectiveness of the sacrament is not dependent on the devoutness or the intention of the one who administers the sacrament. However, the Westminster Confession says that the sacraments should be administered by a lawfully ordained minister of the Word.

Presbyterians recognize two sacraments, **Baptism** and the **Lord's Supper**. Each of these is derived from an Old Testament sacrament: baptism from circumcision, and the Lord's Supper from Passover.

1. Baptism

Baptism of infants can be a significant hurdle for a full adoption of the Reformed tradition. *What is the meaning of baptism? And why do we baptize infants?* **To us, baptism represents entry into the body of believers, admission into God's covenant people.** This is the significance of infant baptism. Baptism is also a sign

and seal of the covenant of grace, of the believer's engrafting into Christ, of rebirth and new life, of remission of sins, and of the believer's yielding to God. Adult baptism is a sign, not only of admission to God's covenant people, but of these works as well.

We have previously discussed the Covenant of Grace at some length. You will recall that from the Fall through Noah, Abraham, David, the prophets, and Jesus, God instituted his Covenant of Grace, revealing more of His plan and His grace in each setting. God called out a special people in an unbroken line beginning with Abraham, the called-out ones of Israel through whom God would work. The Church is now the people through whom God works. Paul portrays the Gentile Church as grafted into the tree that was Israel (Romans 11).

In the Old Testament period, formal admission into the covenant people was recognized by circumcision. When God entered into the covenant with Abraham, He declared, *"This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between you and me. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised"* (Genesis 17:10-12).

Note that the mark of the covenant people was to be given to entire households, and that male children were to receive this mark. As the church grew, and especially as Gentiles joined the Church, the Church had to grapple with whether circumcision would continue to be required. At a council in Jerusalem, the Church fathers determined that circumcision would not be required (Acts 15). However, Jesus had commanded baptism for His followers (Matthew 28:19, Mark 16:16). So the early Church baptized those God called out to be His covenant people. In the New Testament, we see whole households being baptized, presumably including children (Acts 10:48; 16:33).

It is appropriate that children be baptized as part of the covenant community. First, God works through covenant families. God has called out a visible people in whom He works and through whom He makes Himself known to the world. This is God's message to Abraham and to us. Peter reminded the crowd gathered at Pentecost that *"the promise is for you and your children"* (Acts 2:39). If you are a parent, you have a responsibility to convey the blessings of the covenant to your children.

Second, the New Testament is greater in grace than the Old. In the Old Testament, women were surely part of the covenant community; however, they did not partake of the sign and seal that showed they were members. Male children were offered the mark of the covenant in the Old Testament; it is logical that they would also be included in the mark of the covenant community under the New Testament. And it is characteristic of God to extend that grace as it becomes available to the Gentiles by offering the sign and seal of membership in the covenant community to female children as well.

Baptism and Regeneration. In other traditions, there is a direct link between baptism and regeneration. The Roman Catholic Church says that baptism results in regeneration. In some Protestant denominations, baptism is not permitted unless one is already believed to have been regenerated. For Presbyterians, baptism can mean that we are regenerated, but it need not. **Baptism of a child does not show that we believe the child has a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.** Infants are baptized to show that they are members of the covenant community. Professing believers are baptized to show that they have new life and are members of the covenant.

The Mode of Baptism. In churches that understand baptism to show regeneration, new life is symbolized by a good dunking. Going under the water represents death and a rising to new life. It also signifies an identification with Christ in His death and resurrection. However, our understanding of the meaning of baptism does not require immersion. Immersion is certainly acceptable, but it is no more effective than sprinkling or pouring.

2. The Lord's Supper (Holy Communion, Eucharist)

Let us turn now to the second sacrament, the Lord's Supper. It may also be properly called by a number of other names: Holy Communion or the Eucharist, the Thanksgiving, the Table of the Lord, or the Breaking of the Bread.

As we have seen, the Lord's Supper came to replace the Passover. As the Hebrews were delivered from the death of the firstborn in Egypt by the sacrifice of a lamb, which then became a meal celebrating their deliverance from bondage, so the sacrifice of Jesus frees us from spiritual bondage to sin, and the meal becomes a communion with God. As you can see, the transition from the Passover to the Lord's Supper was a natural one. The lamb of Passover was a type of the Christ who was to come. That's why Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper during the Passover meal.

In the Roman Catholic Church, it is believed that the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Jesus. The Roman Catholics take the position that when Jesus said, "This is my body," the "is" must be taken literally. This view of the Lord's Supper is called **transubstantiation**; that is, the substance of bread and wine are transferred to something else, the literal body and blood of Jesus. Luther, on the other hand, departed from that view somewhat. He did not believe in the literal transformation of the elements, but he did believe that the literal body and blood of Jesus were present with the elements. This view is called **consubstantiation**.

Calvin rejected both of these views. Calvin believed—as do we Presbyterians—that the Lord's Supper is first a memorial, a remembering of the death of Christ. But even more importantly, he believed that Christ, while not bodily present as the Roman Catholics and Lutherans believed, is **spiritually present**. The influence and presence of Christ are real, but it is a spiritual presence and not a physical presence. Thus, Christ is mediated to us spiritually by the Holy Spirit when we take the elements in faith.

The Faithful Exercise of Discipline (Discipleship) as a Means of Grace

The process of sanctification which is initiated by the regeneration of the Holy Spirit entering the life of an elect person finds its “atmosphere” and its progression in discipleship. Jesus passed on to His disciples (who were later called His Apostles) His Word, ways, and works. The Apostle Paul refers to this sanctification “atmosphere” and progression which transforms as he speaks to the Corinthian church, in 1 Corinthians 11:1: *“Be imitators (mimic) of me, just as I also am (a mimic) of Christ.”* Again he says to the Ephesian church in Ephesians 5:1-2, *“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.”* The one who is a disciple of Christ is disciplined by Him to become like Him just as Jesus said in Matthew 10:24-25, *“A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. It is enough for the disciple that he become as his teacher, and the slave as his master.”* Ultimately, our sanctification is that we continue to look more and more like our Lord Jesus in our words, ways, and works. These will always conform to the Law of God and are practiced by believers solely through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit and as a demonstration of thankfulness to God for salvation.



ECO

A Covenant Order
of Evangelical
Presbyterians

Essential Tenets & Confessional Standards

Essential Tenets

Presbyterians have been of two minds about essential tenets. We recognize that just as there are some central and foundational truths of the gospel affirmed by Christians everywhere, so too there are particular understandings of the gospel that define the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition. All Christians must affirm the central mysteries of the faith, and all those who are called to ordered ministries in a Presbyterian church must also affirm the essential tenets of the Reformed tradition. Recognizing the danger in reducing the truth of the gospel to propositions that demand assent, we also recognize that when the essentials become a matter primarily of individual discernment and local affirmation, they lose all power to unite us in common mission and ministry.

Essential tenets are tied to the teaching of the confessions as reliable expositions of Scripture. The essential tenets call out for explication, not as another confession, but as indispensable indicators of confessional convictions about what Scripture leads us to believe and do. Essential tenets do not replace the confessions, but rather witness to the confessions' common core. This document is thus intended not as a new confession but as a guide to the corporate exploration of and commitment to the great themes of Scripture and to the historic Reformed confessions that set forth those themes.

The great purpose toward which each human life is drawn is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. Each member of the church glorifies God by recognizing and naming His glory, which is the manifestation and revelation of His own nature. Each member of the church enjoys God by being so united with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit as to become a participant in that divine nature, transformed from one degree of glory to another and escorted by Christ into the loving communion of the Trinity. So we confess our faith not as a matter of dispassionate intellectual assent, but rather as an act by which we give God glory and announce our membership in the body of Christ. We trust that when God's glory is so lifted up and when His nature is thus made manifest in the life of the body, the church will be a light that draws people from every tribe and tongue and nation to be reconciled to God.

I. God's Word: The Authority for Our Confession

The clearest declaration of God's glory is found in His Word, both incarnate and written. The Son eternally proceeds from the Father as His Word, the full expression of the Father's nature, and since in the incarnation the Word became flesh all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are offered to His disciples. The written Word grants us those treasures, proclaims the saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and graciously teaches all that is necessary for faith and life. **We glorify God**

by recognizing and receiving His authoritative self-revelation, both in the infallible Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and also in the incarnation of God the Son. We affirm that the same Holy Spirit who overshadowed the virgin Mary also inspired the writing and preservation of the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit testifies to the authority of God's Word and illumines our hearts and minds so that we might receive both the Scriptures and Christ Himself aright.

We confess that God alone is Lord of the conscience, but this freedom is for the purpose of allowing us to be subject always and primarily to God's Word. The Spirit will never prompt our conscience to conclusions that are at odds with the Scriptures that He has inspired. The revelation of the incarnate Word does not minimize, qualify, or set aside the authority of the written Word. We are happy to confess ourselves captive to the Word of God, not just individually, but also as members of a community of faith, extending through time and around the globe. In particular, we join with other members of the Presbyterian and Reformed community to affirm the secondary authority of the *Book of Confessions* as a faithful exposition of the Word of God.

II. Trinity and Incarnation: The Two Central Christian Mysteries

A. Trinity

The triune nature of God is the first great mystery of the Christian faith. **With Christians everywhere, we worship the only true God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – who is both one essence and three persons.** God is infinite, eternal, immutable, impassible, and ineffable. He cannot be divided against Himself, nor is He becoming more than He has been, since there is no potential or becoming in Him. He is the source of all goodness, all truth and all beauty, of all love and all life, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. The three persons are consubstantial with one another, being both coeternal, and coequal, such that there are not three gods, nor are there three parts of God, but rather three persons within the one Godhead. The Son is eternally begotten from the Father, and the Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son. All three persons are worthy of worship and praise.

God has no need of anyone or anything beyond Himself. Yet in grace this Triune God is the one Creator of all things. The ongoing act of creation is further manifested in God's gracious sovereignty and providence, maintaining the existence of the world and all living creatures for the sake of His own glory. He is the Holy One, the ground of all being, whose glory is so great that for us to see Him is to die. Yet He has made the creation to reflect His glory, and He has made human beings in His own image, with a unique desire to know Him and a

capacity for relationship with Him. Since our God is a consuming fire whom we in our sin cannot safely approach, He has approached us by entering into our humanity in Jesus Christ.

B. Incarnation

This is the second great mystery of the Christian faith, affirmed by all Christians everywhere: that **Jesus Christ is both truly God and truly human**. As to His divinity, He is the Son, the second person of the Trinity, being of one substance with the Father; as to His humanity, He is like us in every way but sin, of one substance with us, like us in having both a human soul and a human body. As to His divinity, He is eternally begotten of the Father; as to His humanity, He is born of the virgin Mary, conceived by the Holy Spirit. As to His divinity, His glory fills heaven and earth; as to His humanity, His glory is shown in the form of a suffering servant, most clearly when He is lifted up on the cross in our place.

We confess the mystery of His two natures, divine and human, in one person. We reject any understanding of the communication of attributes that must result in a blending of the two natures such that Jesus Christ is neither truly God nor truly human. We insist upon sufficient distinction between the two natures to preserve the truth of the incarnation, that Jesus Christ is indeed Immanuel, God-with-us, not one who used to be God, nor one who has merely been sent from God. Rather, in His coming we have seen God's glory, for Jesus is the exact imprint of God's very being and in Him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. **The divinity of the Son is in no way impaired, limited, or changed by His gracious act of assuming a human nature, and that His true humanity is in no way undermined by His continued divinity.** This is a mystery that we cannot explain, but we affirm it with joy and confidence.

This mystery of the incarnation is ongoing, for **the risen Jesus, who was sent from the Father, has now ascended to the Father in His resurrected body and remains truly human**. He is bodily present at the right hand of the Father. When we are promised that one day we will see Him face to face, we acknowledge that it is the face of Jesus of Nazareth we will someday see. The one who, for us and for our salvation, was born of Mary, died at Calvary, and walked with disciples to Emmaus is the same Jesus Christ who is now ascended and who will one day return visibly in the body to judge the living and the dead.

Jesus promised His disciples that He would not leave them comfortless when He ascended into heaven, but would ask the Father to send them the Holy Spirit as a comforter and advocate. **We are able to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and God only through the work of the Holy Spirit.** He comes to us as He came to the gathered disciples at Pentecost: to kindle our faith, to embolden our witness, and to accompany us in mission.

III. Essentials of the Reformed Tradition

A. God's grace in Christ

God declared that the world He created was good and that human beings, made in His own image, were very good. **The present disordered state of the world, in which we and all things are subject to misery and to evil, is not God's doing, but is rather a result of humanity's free, sinful rebellion against God's will.** God created human beings from the dust of the earth and His own breath, to be His images and representatives, conduits of God's grace to the creation. Since the fall our natural tendency is to abuse and exploit the creation, preferring evil to goodness. God also created human beings to speak His grace and truth to one another, to be helpers who are fit for one another, so that our social relationships would strengthen our ability to serve and obey Him. Since the fall, our natural tendency is to engage in relationships of tyranny and injustice with one another, in which power is used not to protect and serve but to demean. God further created human beings with the capacity for relationship with Him, with His law written on our hearts so that we had the ability to worship Him in love and obey Him by living holy lives. Since the fall, our natural tendency is to hate God and our neighbor, to worship idols of our own devising rather than the one true God.

As a result of sin, human life is poisoned by everlasting death. **No part of human life is untouched by sin. Our desires are no longer trustworthy guides to goodness, and what seems natural to us no longer corresponds to God's design.** We are not merely wounded in our sin; we are dead, unable to save ourselves. Apart from God's initiative, salvation is not possible for us. Our only hope is God's grace. We discover in Scripture that this is a great hope, for our God is the One whose mercy is from everlasting to everlasting.

This grace does not end when we turn to sin. Although we are each deserving of God's eternal condemnation, the eternal Son assumed our human nature, joining us in our misery and offering Himself on the cross in order to free us from slavery to death and sin. Jesus takes our place both in bearing the weight of condemnation against our sin on the cross and in offering to God the perfect obedience that humanity owes to Him but is no longer able to give. All humanity participates in the fall into sin. Those who are united through faith with Jesus Christ are fully forgiven from all our sin, so that there is indeed a new creation. We are declared justified, not because of any good that we have done, but only because of God's grace extended to us in Jesus Christ. **In union with Christ through the power of the Spirit we are brought into right relation with the Father, who receives us as His adopted children.**

Jesus Christ is the only Way to this adoption, the sole path by which sinners become children of God, for He is the only-begotten Son, and it is only in union with Him that a believer is able to know God as Father. Only in Jesus Christ is the truth about the Triune God, fully and perfectly revealed, for only He *is* the Truth, only He has seen the Father, and only He can make the Father known. Only Jesus Christ is the new Life

that is offered, for He is the bread from heaven and the fountain of living water, the one by whom all things were made, in whom all things hold together. The exclusivity of these claims establishes that God's love is not impersonal, but a particular and intimate love in which each individual child of God is called by name and known as precious; that God's love is not only acceptance, but a transforming and effective love in which His image within us is restored so that we are capable of holy living.

B. Election for salvation and service

The call of God to the individual Christian is not merely an invitation that each person may accept or reject by his or her own free will. **Having lost true freedom of will in the fall, we are incapable of turning toward God of our own volition. God chooses us for Himself in grace before the foundation of the world, not because of any merit on our part, but only because of His love and mercy.** Each of us is chosen in Christ, who is eternally appointed to be head of the body of the elect, our brother and our high priest. He is the one who is bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, our divine Helper who is also our Bridegroom, sharing our human nature so that we may see His glory. We who receive Him and believe in His name do so not by our own will or wisdom, but because His glory compels us irresistibly to turn toward Him. By His enticing call on our lives, Jesus enlightens our minds, softens our hearts, and renews our wills, restoring the freedom that we lost in the fall.

We are all sinners who fall short of God's glory, and we all deserve God's eternal judgment. Apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ, we are incapable of being in God's presence, incapable of bearing the weight of His glory. We rejoice that Jesus Christ offers us safe conduct into the heart of God's consuming and purifying fire, shielding us with His perfect humanity and transforming us by His divine power. Having received such grace, we extend grace to others.

We are not elect for our own benefit alone. God gathers His covenant community to be an instrument of His saving purpose. **Through His regenerating and sanctifying work, the Holy Spirit grants us faith and enables holiness, so that we may be witnesses of God's gracious presence to those who are lost.** The Spirit gathers us in a community that is built up and equipped to be light, salt, and yeast in the world. Christ sends us into the world to make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that Christ has commanded us. We are now in service to God's plan for the fullness of time: uniting all things in heaven and earth to Himself. To this end, we preach Christ, calling all persons to repent and believe the gospel. We also care for the natural world, claim all areas of culture in the name of Jesus, serve the poor, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, and defend the helpless. We do this work not with any thought that we are able to bring in the kingdom, but in the confident hope that God's kingdom is surely coming, a day when suffering and death will pass away and when God will live among His people.

C. Covenant life in the church

We are elect in Christ to become members of the community of the new covenant. This covenant, which God Himself guarantees, unites us to God and to one another. Already in the creation, we discover that we are made to live in relationships to others, male and female, created together in God's image. **In Christ, we are adopted into the family of God and find our new identity as brothers and sisters of one another, since we now share one Father.** Our faith requires our active participation in that covenant community.

Jesus prays that His followers will all be one, and so we both pray and work for the union of the church throughout the world. Even where institutional unity does not seem possible, we are bound to other Christians as our brothers and sisters. In Christ the dividing wall of hostility created by nationality, ethnicity, gender, race, and language differences is brought down. God created people so that the rich variety of His wisdom might be reflected in the rich variety of human beings, and the church must already now begin to reflect the eschatological reality of people from every tribe, and tongue, and nation bringing the treasures of their kingdoms into the new city of God.

Within the covenant community of the church, God's grace is extended through the preaching of the Word, the administration of the Sacraments, and the faithful practice of mutual discipline. First, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the word proclaimed may indeed become God's address to us. The Spirit's illuminating work is necessary both for the one who preaches and for those who listen. Second, the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs that are linked to the things signified, sealing to us the promises of Jesus. In the Baptism of infants, we confess our confidence in God's gracious initiative, that a baby who cannot turn to God is nonetheless claimed as a member of the covenant community, a child of God, cleansed by grace and sealed by the Spirit; in the Baptism of adults, we confess our confidence that God's grace can make us new creations at any stage of our lives. In the Lord's Supper, we confess that as we eat the bread and share one cup the Spirit unites us to the ascended Christ, so that His resurrection life may nourish, strengthen, and transform us. Third, the community of the Church practices discipline in order to help one another along the path to new life, speaking the truth in love to one another, bearing one another's burdens, and offering to one another the grace of Christ.

D. Faithful stewardship of all of life

The ministries of the church reflect the three-fold office of Christ as prophet, priest, and king – reflected in the church's ordered ministries of teaching elders, deacons, and ruling elders. We affirm that men and women alike are called to all the ministries of the Church, and that every member is called to share in all of Christ's offices within the world beyond the church. Every Christian is called to a prophetic life, proclaiming the good news to the world and enacting that good news. Every Christian is called to extend the lordship of Christ to every corner of the world. And every Christian is called to participate in Christ's priestly, mediatorial

work, sharing in the suffering of the world in ways that extend God's blessing and offering intercession to God on behalf of the world. We are equipped to share in these offices by the Holy Spirit, who conforms us to the pattern of Christ's life.

Jesus teaches us that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind. There is no part of human life that is off limits to the sanctifying claims of God. We reject the claim that love of any sort is self-justifying; we affirm that all our affections and desires must be brought under God's authority. We reject the claim that human souls are unaffected by the fall and remain naturally inclined to God; we affirm that soul and body alike must be cleansed and purified in order to love God properly. We reject the claim that the life of the mind is independent from faith; we affirm that unless we believe we cannot properly understand either God or the world around us. Historically, the Presbyterian tradition has been especially called to explore what it is to love God with all our minds, being committed to the ongoing project of Christian education and study at all levels of Christian life.

E. Living in obedience to the Word of God
Progress in holiness is an expected response of gratitude to the grace of God, which is initiated, sustained, and fulfilled by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. The first response of gratitude is prayer, and the daily discipline of prayer – both individually and together – should mark the Christian life. The life of prayer includes praise to God for His nature and works, sincere confession of our sin, and intercession for the needs of those we know and for the needs of the world. **As we practice the discipline of regular self-examination and confession, we are especially guided by the Ten Commandments.** We therefore hold one another accountable to:

1. worship God alone, living all of life to His glory, renouncing all idolatry and all inordinate loves that might lead us to trust in any other help;
2. worship God in humility, being reticent in either describing or picturing God, recognizing that right worship is best supported not by our own innovative practices but through the living preaching of the Word and the faithful administration of the Sacraments;
3. eliminate from both speech and thought any blasphemy, irreverence, or impurity;
4. observe the Sabbath as a day of worship and rest, being faithful in gathering with the people of God;
5. give honor toward those set in authority over us and practice mutual submission within the community of the church;
6. eradicate a spirit of anger, resentment, callousness, violence, or bitterness, and instead cultivate a spirit of gentleness, kindness, peace, and love; recognize and honor the image of God in every human being

from conception to natural death.

7. maintain chastity in thought and deed, being faithful within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman as established by God at the creation or embracing a celibate life as established by Jesus in the new covenant;
8. practice right stewardship of the goods we have been given, showing charity to those in need and offering generous support of the Church and its ministries;
9. pursue truth, even when such pursuit is costly, and defend truth when it is challenged, recognizing that truth is in order to goodness and that its preservation matters;
10. resist the pull of envy, greed, and acquisition, and instead cultivate a spirit of contentment with the gifts God has given us.

In Jesus Christ we see the perfect expression of God's holy will for human beings offered to God in our place. His holy life must now become our holy life. In Christ, God's will is now written on our hearts, and we look forward to the day when we will be so confirmed in holiness that we will no longer be able to sin. As the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, Jesus leads us along the path of life toward that goal, bringing us into ever deeper intimacy with the Triune God, in whose presence is fullness of joy.

Confessional Standards

The appropriate confessional standards for ECO are the creeds, confessions, and catechisms in the *Book of Confessions* – The Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed, the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Second Helvetic Confession, the Westminster Confession, the Westminster Shorter Catechism and the Westminster Larger Catechism, the Theological Declaration of Barmen, the Confession of 1967, and A Brief Statement of Faith. This collection is theologically faithful, ecclesially appropriate, and organizationally suitable. The *Book of Confessions* contains the confessions that we have taken vows to receive. It also embodies the Reformed understanding of the way confessions function in the life of the church, an understanding that differs from two common approaches:

Doctrinal Progressives understand the church's confessional and theological tradition as an evolutionary development of doctrine in which the church's expression of the gospel becomes richer in each succeeding age. In this view, contemporary theology and new confessions of faith are more developed, better expressed, fuller apprehensions of truth than the faith of previous centuries. *Our way is the way.*

Doctrinal Restorationists understand the church's theological and confessional tradition as a series of missteps leading to imperfect understanding and inadequate articulation of the gospel. In this view, a particular moment in the church's confessional and theological tradition, such as the sixteenth century Augsburg Confession or the seventeenth century Westminster standards, is the pure faith of a theological golden age. *Their way is the way.*

The Reformed understanding of the church's confessional and theological tradition sees contemporary Christians as participants in an enduring theological and doctrinal conversation that shapes the patterns of the church's faith and life. Communities of believers from every time and place engage in a continuous discussion about the shape of Christian faith and life, an exchange that is maintained through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Today's church brings its insights into an ongoing dialogue with those who have lived and died the Faith before us. Voices from throughout the church's life contribute to the interchange – ancient voices that articulate the enduring rule of faith, sixteenth and seventeenth century voices that shape the Reformed tradition, and twentieth century voices that proclaim the church's faith in challenging contexts. The confessions in the *Book of Confessions* were not arbitrarily included, but were selected to give faithful voice to the whole communion of saints.

The *Book of Confessions* is an appropriate expression of the Reformed commitment to honor our fathers and mothers in the Faith. It begins with two foundational creeds, shared throughout the whole Church. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is the decisive dogmatic articulation of Trinitarian faith. It establishes the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of Christian theology. The Apostles' Creed is the Baptismal creed that expresses the shared belief of the faithful as persons are incorporated into the body of Christ. Two Reformation confessions, Scots and Second Helvetic, and one Reformation catechism, Heidelberg, give voice to the dawning of the Reformed tradition. The seventeenth century Westminster standards powerfully express God's sovereignty over all of life. The Theological Declaration of Barmen, the Confession of 1967, and A Brief Statement of Faith articulate the church's fidelity to the gospel in the midst of uncongenial and sometimes hazardous cultures. These confessions, from widely different contexts, are complementary. They do not sing in unison, but in a rich harmony that glorifies God and deepens our enjoyment of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

Are these the only voices that could be included in the church's theological conversation? No, but they are faithful witnesses to the gospel and appropriate expressions of the Reformed perspective on Christian faith and life. Participating in their colloquy frees us from the narrow prison cell of our own time and place by listening to the voices of our brothers and sisters who struggled to be faithful in diverse circumstances. Through their confessions of faith we are privileged to hear their wisdom in the midst of our own struggle to be faithful. We overhear conversations among our forebears that expand and enrich our apprehension of the gospel. Sometimes we simply listen in on their discussion, at other times we pay particular attention to one of their voices, and many times we find ourselves participating actively in lively instruction.

The questions of our parents in the faith may not be identical to ours, but their different approaches enable us to understand our own questions better. Their answers may not be identical to ours, yet their answers startle us into new apprehensions of the truth. We may sometimes be puzzled by their particular questions or answers, but even that perplexity serves to clarify our own thinking and the shape of our faithfulness. Throughout the conversation we are aware that all councils may err, yet because we are not doctrinal progressives we acknowledge the confessions have a particular authority over us: we are answerable to them before they are answerable to us.

The confessions call the church to account. Because we are not traditionalists, we can be utterly honest about the church's past failings - crusades and inquisitions, easy acceptance of Christendom and easy dismissal of the leadership of women, neglect of evangelistic mission and excess of missionary zeal. Because we are not idealists we can be utterly honest about the church's current failings – marginalization of the Sacraments, indifference to theological labor, easy acceptance of cultural morality, neglect of evangelism, and inadequate mission. If we listen to our forebears in the Faith we will hear their hard questions addressed to us. Perhaps then we can be utterly honest about our own accommodations to the culture, our indifference to the proclamation of the gospel, and our abandonment of shared conviction and committed community in easy acquiescence to the individualism and localism of our time.

The confessions are not final authorities; Scripture is the authority that measures all doctrinal, confessional, and theological expression. The Reformed tradition has always understood that while confessional standards are subordinate to the Scriptures, they are, nonetheless, standards. They are not lightly drawn up or subscribed to, nor may they be ignored or dismissed. Being questioned by the confessions is not an exercise in servitude, but liberation from the tyranny of the present that enables us to live freely and faithfully within God's will.

As subordinate standards, the confessions are not free-standing authorities. They are subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, who is known through Scripture, the word of God. Subordination to the Lord and to Scripture's witness serves to locate confessional authority, however, not diminish it. The confessions provide reliable guidance to our reading and reception of Scripture, protecting us from self-absorbed interpretation, and opening us to Christ's way, Christ's truth, and Christ's life.

The *Book of Confessions* itself is not problematic. The problem with the *Book of Confessions* is the church's – the *whole* church's – neglect and misuse of its theological treasure. Too often, we have treated the confessions of the church as museum pieces, historical artifacts of what people used to believe long ago and far away. Too many of us have imagined that our own thoughts are sufficient for faithful proclamation of the gospel. We have been guilty of what C.S. Lewis called "chronological snobbery, the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited." We have also been guilty of reducing the confessions to theological and moral law books, selecting disembodied affirmations as elements in a logical proof. Our task is to put misuse of the confessions behind us, engaging in bold, faithful appropriations of the doctrinal and theological wisdom of the *Book of Confessions*, allowing them to enrich our faith and faithfulness.

The church's confessions are not marginal details in the church's life. The ordination vows made by most deacons, ruling elders, and teaching elders commit us to receive and

adopt their essential tenets, and to be instructed, led, and guided by them. Our task is to be faithful to our vows, reading and studying the confessions, learning from them, teaching them, and living out their wisdom. Shared confession of faith shapes any serious community of faith, and the community's ordered ministries bear a particular obligation to order their confession around the church's creeds, confessions, and catechisms. Because confessional seriousness includes mutual responsibility and accountability, the church must be prepared to instruct, counsel with, or even discipline one ordained who rejects the faith expressed in the confessions.

ECO cannot imagine that it should or could disavow the Reformed confessional heritage. Whatever the church's confessional and theological failings may be, they are the failings of all of us. The task now is to embody faithful ways of being Presbyterian. The most appropriate footing for a new venture is the faithful doctrinal and theological foundation provided by the creeds, confessions, and catechisms of the *Book of Confessions*.

Appendix: A Proposal for Ongoing Theological Conversations

Truth leads to duty, faith to practice. A church that wants to be a servant found faithful to its commission must be a steward of the Faith entrusted to its care. To be an effective witness to the gospel we must know the gospel. An apostolic church must not only live a life like that of the apostles, it must teach what the apostles taught.

Some generations of believers have tried to live faithfully without a shared Faith; all have failed. Our generation may be particularly tempted to try. Forging theological consensus is hard work in any generation, but ours seems to have concluded that it is impossible work. Private and partisan interpretations are now considered inflexible and intractable. We have forgotten the humble recognition that ambiguities exist and must be respected, and now dwell in a land where ambiguities are preferred and certainties are suspect. We are coached to celebrate diversity of theological conviction, rather than seeing this as a sign of important work yet to be done.

Theological debates in the church have not always been filled with grace, or even understanding, and many have been unnecessarily divisive. The formative ecclesial debates of earlier history are viewed as arcane. Doctrinal work is unfavorably compared to relationship building as if the two were mutually exclusive. Teaching elders attempt to teach how to live lives faithful to the truth without doing the required work of laying foundations of the truth in the hearts and minds of the congregation. Ruling elders are equipped to be managers of church life rather than able to teach the Faith.

Although these realities are manifest somewhat differently in churches and among leaders who identify themselves as progressive or evangelical, neglect of the substance of the Faith is wide and deep. As a result, all other matters suffer – the strength of disciples, the health of congregations, the effectiveness of councils. Disciplined attention to the Word gives gifts to the Church that it cannot receive elsewhere or by any other means.

Renewal of theological work at the core of our common life is not only an acknowledged need but, in the providence of God, may be a blessed provision. Throughout history, the reformation of the Church has followed theological work – work that grew from recommitment to the Faith. In turn, the reformation of the Church has fostered a recommitment to theological work.

Now is the time to reengage the theological work, for this moment, and for the next generations.

Renewed commitment to sustained conversation is needed. At its best, sustained conversation is characterized by prayerful and rigorous study of the Scripture with attention to clarifying the Reformed theological lens through which we read the Scriptures, by grateful listening to the voice of the church around the world and through the ages, and application of the theological wisdom to every part of life before God and for the world.

Toward these ends, we now commit ourselves to the formation of theological friendships in communities that include all teaching and ruling elders – gatherings of elders which covenant to study and learn together, providing mutual encouragement and accountability for the sake of sustaining and advancing the theological and missional work of the church.

Necessary to this commitment are:

1. Identifying the best practices of current theological projects and relationships within the Church that will help guide the shape of these theological friendships.
2. Building the structures that connect elders with each other locally, regionally, and nationally in environments that establish and sustain theological friendships.

These theological friendships should strive to:

- transform life and ministry,
- be sustained over the years,
- include a breadth of participants
 - gender, age, ethnic and global communities
 - other Reformed churches
 - other orthodox and evangelical theological traditions,
- engage other theological friendships, thus forming broadening communities, worship and witness together.

An invitation is now offered in an excellent resource, “A Pastoral Rule,” developed by the Re-forming Ministry Program of the PC(USA)’s Office of Theology and Worship. This resource invites us to commit to personal disciplines, conduct in ministry that is holy, and mutual encouragement and accountability. It is offered to the whole church as a tool for the formation of theological friendships that sustain us and are sustained over time. We propose that ECO congregations accept that invitation to adapt and then adopt “The Pastoral Rule.”

These three theological projects are offered for broad immediate consideration:

- Recommitment to a particular confessional heritage as an immediate core constituent of our renewed common life, however that common life is re-formed.
- Identification and affirmation of the essential tenets of the Reformed Faith.
- Commitment to re-engaging the theological enterprise broadly and deeply.

Further advance on these three projects will be made as we put our theology on the table for public discussion, deliberation, and decision; share best practices; form theological-missional relationships; build the structures; and covenant together.

Questions for immediate consideration:

Do we consider the proposal to reaffirm the *Book of Confessions* as we work to build and test theological consensus among us, to be the right judgment to make at this time? Is this an adequate and helpful articulation of the essentials of the Faith as expressed in Reformed ways, and will we sincerely adopt it? What theological friendships will we form, what practices will we commit to, and what structures will we build for mutual encouragement and accountability?

The theological project is required of the Church, and now is being re-engaged within the Church. The invitation is now offered. How will you respond?

ADDENDUM

Suggested questions for the covenanting gatherings of theological friends:

What has the Spirit gathered the Church to be? What has the Spirit sent the Church to do?
Always and everywhere; here and now.

What is the authority of Scripture in the actual life of the church? How will we teach and obey the Scripture?

What does it mean to be saved? What is the gospel we are to preach? What is the shape of our corporate and individual lives that are formed by that gospel?

Elders, ruling as well as teaching, are to be equipped to teach. Teach what, to whom, how? Ruling elders are to measure out the patterns of faithfulness for the congregation. What are those patterns, and how are they measured?

In a time of both ecclesial division and realignment, how can schism among parts of the church be diminished and how can reconnection with the whole church be increased?

The Church has a Faith without which she cannot live faithfully. What is that Faith? What is faithful living?



The mission of ECO
is to build *flourishing churches*
that make *disciples of Jesus Christ*.

OUR VALUES

Jesus-shaped Identity:

We believe Jesus Christ must be at the center of our lives and making disciples of Jesus at the core of our ministry.

Biblical Integrity:

We believe the Bible is the unique and authoritative Word of God, which teaches all that is necessary for faith and life. The prominence of God's Word over our lives shapes our priorities, and the unrivaled authority of the Bible directs our actions to be in concert with Christ's very best for our lives.

Thoughtful Theology:

We believe in theological education, constant learning, and the life of the mind, and celebrate this as one of the treasures of our Reformed heritage.

Accountable Community:

We believe guidance is a corporate spiritual experience. We want to connect leaders to one another in healthy relationships of accountability, synergy, and care.

Egalitarian Ministry:

We believe in unleashing the ministry gifts of women, men, and every ethnic group.

Missional Centrality:

We believe in living out the whole of the Great Commission – including evangelism, spiritual formation, compassion, and redemptive justice – in our communities and around the world.

Center-focused Spirituality:

We believe in calling people to the core of what it means to be followers of Jesus – what “mere Christianity” is and does – and not fixate on the boundaries.

Leadership Velocity:

We believe identifying and developing gospel-centered leaders is critical for the church, and a great leadership culture is risk-taking, innovative, and organic.

Kingdom Vitality:

We believe congregations should vigorously reproduce new missional communities to expand the Kingdom of God.