

**THE ESSENTIAL TENETS – AN EXPLANATION
PRESBYTERY OF SANTA BARBARA**

Approved by presbytery May 9, 2006

INTRODUCTION

In November 2005, the Committee on Preparation for Ministry (CPM) of the Presbytery of Santa Barbara proposed a program for implementation and use by the Presbytery, its committees and its churches. This program is for the establishment of Guidelines regarding the Christian doctrines which this Presbytery regards as essential for ordained office as that term is used in G-14.0207c and G-14.0405b(3). This document was approved by the Presbytery of Santa Barbara on May 9, 2006 for use in all Presbytery proceedings involving education and examination of ordained officers within the Presbytery

PURPOSE

The motivation for this program comes from question #3 in the ordination process of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

“Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?”

Presbyteries and sessions (and certain of their committees) are required to examine candidates, ministers of Word and Sacrament, elders and deacons, to assure that their theological views are compatible with the confessional documents of the church (G-14.0305j(3)). The 209th General Assembly (1997) added an introduction to the Book of Confessions titled CONFESSIONAL NATURE OF THE CHURCH REPORT. In this paper, the church has attempted to provide guidelines to Presbyteries, committees and Sessions in their examination duties. The paper accurately describes the current dilemma facing the church today - the Confessions contained in the Book of Confessions are not totally consistent on all doctrines, and there has been controversy within the PCUSA for many years over which doctrines are essential.

The Presbytery, its sessions and committees are required to examine candidates for ordained office to determine if they adhere to certain theological standards. The above referenced introduction to the Book of Confessions states that we may (but are not required to) make declarations on what is essential and necessary, and determine whether differences are allowed. On the other hand, it forbids us to draw up any list of doctrines or set forth any specific articles of faith that would precisely state what those standards might be.

Our task is further complicated when we look to the Book of Order. Statements from the Book of Order regarding this topic include:

1. These confessions “declare to its members and the world who and what it [the church] is, what it believes, (and) what it resolves to do”. And while confessional standards are subordinate to scripture, they are nonetheless standards. The church is prepared to counsel and even discipline one ordained who seriously rejects the faith expressed in the confessions (G-0200).
2. The committee on preparation for ministry shall conduct a final assessment of the candidate’s readiness to begin ministry. This consultation shall focus on the outcomes of inquiry (G-14.0303g) and candidacy (G-14.0305j). G-14.0305j requires that each candidate demonstrate readiness to begin ministry by “expressing theological views compatible with the confessional documents of the church” (subparagraph (3)).

With these apparently conflicting instructions, where do we turn? The choices seem to be:

1. We decline to issue any further standards or guidelines at the presbytery level. We refer both examiners and examinees to the Book of Order and Book of Confessions. Determinations as to “compatible views” are made on a case by case basis, knowing that decisions may well vary depending upon the membership of the committee/presbytery/session at any given time. Candidates are informed that no specific standards of acceptability exist, and that whether they pass will depend upon the leading of the Holy Spirit within the minds and hearts of committee, session and presbytery members at the time of their examination. Committee membership will change over time, and particularly for candidates under care, approval at one stage of preparation is no guarantee of later approval. In the case of a church calling a pastor, Pastor Nominating Committees (PNCs) and Committees on Ministry (COMs) may have very different understandings of acceptable theological positions.
2. We issue standards at the presbytery level, defining and narrowing the acceptable theological views. While this makes life more predictable for candidates and committee members, it has serious drawbacks. The presbytery may err in setting these standards, and correcting them may be difficult. Even if they are not in error, much time could be consumed in debating them, both initially and subsequently. Furthermore, it appears to conflict with clear church teaching regarding such matters.
3. We issue guidelines, not standards, at the presbytery level. These would identify which doctrines our presbytery considers “essential and necessary.” The guidelines would identify the confessional statements relating to these doctrines.

RECOMMENDATION AND ENDORSEMENTS

CPM recommends option 3. Rather than establishing specific answers required of the candidate, we recommend the enclosed paper titled Essential Doctrines and Reformed Distinctives (henceforth referred to as the Guidelines). The Guidelines clearly specify the topics of inquiry (i.e., the essential tenets). After describing briefly a summation of confessional positions, they identify the major traditionally *wrong* answers, but do not specify the exact *right* answers. In that respect they do not violate the church's positions on the use of confessional statements, yet they guide participants in both study and examination.

When used in discussions, clergy and candidates can note, explain and discuss their theological viewpoints on particular topics which may bring added clarification, amplification or richness to particular doctrines. All persons engaged in such discussions need not agree on all points of interpretation for the reviewing body to be satisfied that positions expressed are within the bounds of contemporary Reformed theological understanding.

The Guidelines have been reviewed by COM and the Committee on Education and Leadership Development (CELD), and comments incorporated into the current version. COM has endorsed the Guidelines; the CELD has declined to endorse but has not objected to them. Presbytery Council has approved the Guidelines for first reading to the presbytery.

STRUCTURE OF GUIDELINES

The Guidelines are designed to conform to the structure provided in Chapter II of the Book of Order – THE CHURCH AND ITS CONFESSIONS. The Essential Doctrines section of the Guidelines matches paragraphs G-2.0300 and 0400, which paragraphs identify the doctrines we hold in common with all Christians and all Protestants.

The Reformed Distinctives section of the Guidelines matches paragraph G-2.0500, which paragraph identifies the doctrines we hold in common with all Christians of the Reformed tradition.

Together these Essential Doctrines and Reformed Distinctives comprise the Essential Tenets of the Reformed Faith as this presbytery (if approved) believes that phrase is used in the third ordination question.

USES

The Presbytery of Santa Barbara intends that the following bodies of the Presbytery use these Guidelines, and for the following purposes.

The Presbytery – The Presbytery shall use the Guidelines when examining Ministers of Word and Sacrament brought before them for ordination, installation and transfer. The Guidelines shall be used both for formulating questions and for evaluating answers.

CPM – The CPM shall distribute a copy of these Guidelines to all inquirers and candidates within this Presbytery, and shall inform them that they shall be examined regarding them at any point in their preparation process, but most particularly at that time when they seek to be advanced to candidacy and/or to be certified ready to receive a call.

COM – The COM shall provide these Guidelines to all PNCs as part of their oversight responsibility, and through their PNC liaison assure that all candidates for positions of ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament within this Presbytery be given a copy as well. The COM shall also assure that all other Ministers of Word and Sacrament requesting membership in this Presbytery be provided a copy of the Guidelines, and shall clearly state that the Guidelines will provide the basis for examination prior to acceptance of membership.

Other bodies and groups – Whenever and wherever church bodies, committees, teachers, study groups or individuals need to know or seek to know the essential doctrines of the churches in the Presbytery of Santa Barbara, these Guidelines are recommended and approved by this Presbytery for use in instruction, clarification and examination for conformity among formal and informal leaders of our churches.

ESSENTIAL TENETS COMMON BIBLICAL DOCTRINES AND REFORMED DISTINCTIVES

**for Guidance of Sessions and Nominating Committees,
the Committee on Preparation for Ministry,
the Committee on Education and Leadership Development,
and the Committee on Ministry
of the Presbytery of Santa Barbara**

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INTRODUCTION

from the Form of Government in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

Every Christian Church, or union, or association of particular churches, is entitled to declare the terms of admission into its communion, and the qualifications of its ministers and members, as well as the whole system of its internal government which Christ hath appointed. (*Historic Principles of Church Government*, G-1.0300(2))

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) states its faith and bears witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ in [its] creeds and confessions. ... These statements identify the church as a community of people known by its convictions as well as by its actions. They guide the church in its study and interpretation of the Scriptures; they summarize the essence of Christian tradition; they direct the church in maintaining sound doctrines; they equip the church for its work of proclamation. (*The Church and Its Confessions*, G-2.0100(b))

“Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?” (G-14.0405b(3))

As nominating committees consider candidates for church office, as PNCs interview prospective pastors, as elders train newly-elected elders and deacons, as CPMs prepare candidates for ministry, as Committees on Education and Leadership Development train ordained officers of the church, and as COMs consider receiving ordained clergy into Presbytery, it is their responsibility to ensure that the essential tenets of the Reformed faith have been understood and sincerely received and adopted as the constitution requires.

Because it is the constitutional responsibility of Presbytery to ensure the doctrinal faithfulness and integrity of its ministers and officers, and because the Committee on Preparation for Ministry is delegated this responsibility by the Presbytery—to prepare candidates for final assessment and trials of ordination before the Presbytery, we have prepared a partial list of common biblical and Reformed doctrines that we consider essential and distinctive, along with (1) summaries of the doctrines and (2) Scripture and (3) confessional citations supporting and explaining them. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible is used for all scripture references.

Representing the Presbytery of Santa Barbara, we commend to all candidates and nominees this list and its summaries. Candidates will be examined on their knowledge of these doctrines and whether they can give consent to them with theological integrity and a blameless conscience.

In preparing this summary we have distinguished “common biblical doctrines,” which are generally the most catholic elements of our Reformed tradition, and “reformed distinctives,” which distinguish us from other major theological traditions and are more the exclusive property of Presbyterian and Reformed Christians. We have been guided in this distinction by Chapter II of the Book of Order (The Church and its Confessions), generally identifying “common biblical doctrines” with paragraphs G-2.0300 and G-2.0400, and “reformed distinctives” with paragraph G-2.0500.

For purposes of clarity we have deviated from this format in two instances. First, we have placed the Reformed view of the human condition under common biblical doctrines, since it is a necessary prerequisite for understanding the nature and work of Christ. Second, we have added a section on the sacraments under ‘reformed distinctives’ as being essential to the office of Minister of Word and Sacrament.

The combination of “common biblical doctrines” and “reformed distinctives” comprise what we believe are meant by the “essential tenets of the reformed faith” as expressed in G-14.0405b(3).

In pressing for confessional fidelity, we are occasionally challenged by a historic phrase from our tradition and the Book of Order: “God alone is Lord of the conscience.” The implication is that no one but God may bind our theological conscience in terms of what is to be believed. *And we agree!* The full quote explains the proper context and understanding of this phrase:

God alone is Lord of the conscience and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are *in anything contrary to his Word*, or beside it, *in matters of faith or worship*. (G-1.0301(1)) (italics added for emphasis)

In other words, precisely where God’s Word has spoken and precisely in matters of faith and worship—that is where our conscience is bound and *not free*. The Lord who has spoken through his written Word binds our conscience in matters of faith and worship. It is entirely appropriate and even necessary, therefore, for the ordained leadership of the church to diligently direct, teach, correct, and make inquiry concerning the doctrines that elders, deacons, and ministers of Word and Sacrament “sincerely receive and adopt”—that these doctrines are consistent with the Bible and our Reformed standards.

This document is our thoughtful and intentional effort to fulfill that responsibility.

SECTION 1 COMMON BIBLICAL DOCTRINES

GOD

We worship the one only living and true God who is revealed in the Bible and who is the source of all life, glory, goodness, and blessedness.

Trinity. With the holy catholic church in all ages, we confess the mystery of the holy Trinity—that there is one God alone, infinite and eternal, Creator of all things, the greatest good, who is one in essence or nature, yet who exists in a plurality of three distinct persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Creation/Providence/Sovereignty. God in the beginning created the universe and everything in it for the manifestation of God’s glory, eternal power, wisdom, and goodness. He is the sovereign ruler of creation, working all things according to the counsel of his omnipotent and righteous will. In gracious providence God continually upholds, directs, oversees, and governs creation—all creatures, actions, and things.

In sovereignty God has seen fit to accommodate free will among moral creatures, resulting in great cultural and cosmic good and terrible evil, disorder, and disobedience. Nevertheless, God is in no way the author of evil or sin, but continues to govern creation in such a way as to cause all things to work together for good for those who love Him. God opposes all evil and will certainly triumph over it and bring creation to a glorious consummation.

Grace. God is holy. God is love. God’s holiness demands death for our sin. God’s love desires life for those whom He loves. In grace God chooses to show love and mercy through Christ’s death on the cross. . When we were dead in trespasses and sin, God made us alive with Christ, saving us by grace through faith, as a sheer gift of sovereign love.

Worship. God—and God alone—is worthy of worship. We respond to God by consciously and intentionally seeking to declare, explore, celebrate, and submit to God’s righteous and gracious kingship over all of creation and over every aspect of our individual and corporate life, and thereby “to glorify him and enjoy him forever.” (Westminster, 7.01) This is true worship.

What Is Not Affirmed

We cannot affirm any doctrine—

- that denies this doctrine of God’s triune nature, or refuses to confess the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit;
- that minimizes this doctrine as an unessential or secondary Christian tenet;

- that asserts that all religions are essentially true, that all religious beliefs are essentially in accord; or that the views of God (in their totality) held by the world's major religions are equally valid;
- that confesses or celebrates belief in multiple gods or goddesses, or that identifies God as a goddess, or that worships God through idols or images representing creatures or creation.

The biblical doctrine of God's sovereignty excludes:

- the notion that, if God is sovereign, our human efforts are in vain;
- the deistic notion which says that God created the cosmos like a watchmaker but is no longer personally involved in its operation or unfolding;
- any theology that denies or downplays the reality of evil or the enmity between evil and a holy God or the moral responsibility of humankind for sin.

HUMANITY—ORIGINAL RIGHTEOUSNESS AND FALL INTO SIN

Human beings were created by God in God's own image—in true righteousness and holiness—to know, love, and obey God and be righteous stewards of the creation. Our earliest forebears, instead of acknowledging, worshiping, and obeying God, became disobedient sinners and brought sin and death upon themselves and all creation.

There is now a radical brokenness and corruption in human nature that is the result of and results in sin. Sin is rebellion against God. No human effort can resolve or redeem this defect. Sin is destructive, contagious, parasitical, polluting, disabling. Human beings are sinners by nature, by influence, by choice, by action.

While there is an inalienable glory and nobility to human beings because they are God's image bearers, this image is now broken and distorted, and even our best and noblest actions are contaminated by sin. Every part of our human being—our personality, intellect, emotions, will, motives, virtues, and actions—is corrupted by sin. The human will, originally free and righteous, is now crippled and defective.

As a result, human beings are in bondage to sin and subject to God's holy judgment. Without God's intervening grace and salvation, they are lost and condemned.

What Is Not Affirmed

We cannot affirm—

- the notion that human nature is basically good and self-redeemable through good effort, discipline, improved environment, etc.
- the notion that human beings are not morally responsible for their nature or behavior because of hereditary or environmental influences.
- the notion that God is the author of sin or that sin is part of his original plan to educate and improve humankind.

JESUS CHRIST – INCARNATION OF THE ETERNAL WORD

Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human. In the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the eternal Son of God uniquely entered human history and became a real human being. He is truly the Word of God (Jn 1:1-3)—that is, the perfect and culminating expression of God’s mind and heart, of God’s will and character—present in the intimate fellowship of the Holy Trinity from eternity and fully engaged with the Father in the work of creation and redemption.

Becoming human, Jesus had “in him all the fullness of God” dwelling (Col 1:19) and was “God with us” (Matt 1:23)—a living tabernacle of God’s holy presence, “full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14-18). His divine-human identity is corroborated by the true witness of scripture—in his divine conception and virgin birth, in God’s own testimony concerning Jesus, in Jesus’ supernatural works of healing and deliverance, in his obedience to the point of sacrificial death, and in his bodily resurrection from the dead and exaltation to heaven. He is now Lord over everything in creation.

The early church in the creeds of Nicea and Chalcedon accurately interpreted and expressed the apostolic testimony concerning Jesus—fully God and fully human. The significance of this is: in Christ we are dealing with God himself; in Christ we have a human being who truly represents us.

Jesus Christ is God’s only Mediator between God and humankind and God’s unique agent for the salvation of the world. He is also the perfect expression of what humanity was designed to be. In his complete obedience, he became the representative Human Being, a second Adam, modeling for us human life and offering to God on our behalf human life that is rightly in God’s image—reflecting God’s glory in a wholly submitted life of steadfast love and righteousness.

This same Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, as attested in scripture, is to be the center of the Christian Church’s proclamation, worship, discipleship, and mission. As we eagerly and prayerfully anticipate that “he will come again to judge the living and the dead” and to establish God’s righteous kingdom in fullness and perfection, we say, “Come Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22:20)

What Is Not Affirmed

We cannot affirm any doctrine—

- **that affirms the deity but not the full humanity of Christ, or the humanity but not his full deity (as, for example, the Jehovah’s Witnesses do);**
- **that asserts that Jesus was an inspired or extraordinary or holy man, but was merely human in nature and not the incarnation in history of the eternal Son of God (as, for example, some classic liberal theology asserts);**

- that attempts to supplement the authoritative revelation of the Old and New Testament scriptures concerning Jesus Christ and to propose a corrected or revised revelation of Jesus (as, for example, the Book of Mormon and Mormon teaching do);
- that discounts or discredits as untrue or as unhistoric myth all or portions of the New Testament record concerning Jesus (as, for example, the Jesus Seminar does);
- that does not affirm as biblical and true the death of Christ as the central saving act of our Christian faith, or
- that asserts that Jesus is merely one example, however noteworthy, of a divinely approved or divinely enlightened life;
- that asserts that Jesus is one Mediator between God and humankind among other religious options or among other spiritual or enlightened teachers or mediators;
- that contends that the Jesus Christ attested by Scripture (and proclaimed by the church catholic) is essentially and significantly different from the historic Jesus of Nazareth;
- that misrepresents Jesus' mission in New Age terms, compatible with pantheism or panentheism—namely, a message of human self-fulfillment and divine self-realization, that God is one being with the world or that human beings are essentially divine, and that all religious truth is harmonious and convergent.
- that detracts from Jesus' supreme authority over every human authority, over the church, and over our individual moral lives.

JESUS CHRIST – HIS ATONING WORK
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Jesus' death on the Cross was the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. In this act of obedience to God's will and love for humankind, Jesus acted as the divine agent for the salvation of the world. In his death he perfectly fulfilled the office of High Priest and was also the perfect sacrifice for sins—"the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." (Jn 1:29) The Cross became an altar on which his life was sacrificed as a substitute for ours, and satisfaction and expiation for sins were completely accomplished. On the sole basis of the finished work of Christ on the Cross, sinners may now be reconciled to a holy God and set free from their bondage to sin and death to live for God in holiness and joy.

Exalted upon his bodily resurrection to the place of honor beside God the Father, Jesus Christ the eternal Son, now Lord of heaven and earth, continues his saving work, advocating and interceding on behalf of the church and functioning as our eternal prophet (God's living and revealed Word), priest (ever making intercession and mediation for us), and king (ruling his church by Word and Spirit and with sovereign love and power).

What Is Not Affirmed

We cannot affirm any theology—

- that does not affirm as biblical and true the death and resurrection of Christ as the central saving act of our Christian faith, or
- that rejects these teachings—atonement, substitutionary sacrifice, expiation for sins on the basis of Christ’s death—as obsolete, unworthy, unessential, or irrelevant, or
- that seeks to substitute human effort or to promote some more “culturally relevant” paradigm for our salvation, justification, and reconciliation with God than Christ’s death on the Cross for us.

We also do not affirm the notion that Christ’s atoning work is universally applied to all or most of the human race, so that all or most are saved, regardless of their religion or non-religion and apart from hearing the gospel and believing in Christ.

<p>SALVATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH</p>
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Salvation is God’s gracious work through Jesus Christ to reclaim humankind and all creation from sin and its consequences. Christ’s righteousness and atonement are the sole basis for human salvation. Faith in Christ is the only instrument by which this righteousness is received by individual believers, resulting in their justification.

Justification is the righteousness of Christ imputed to a sinful woman or man *through faith alone* in Christ. Their faith appropriates Christ’s atonement, resulting in their sins atoned for and forgiven and God reckoning them to be righteous.

Scripture also describes salvation as a ransom or redemption from slavery (Mk 10:45); a sacrificial substitution (Christ’s death for our death); reconciliation of sinners with a holy God; our sins being sacrificially expiated, satisfied, covered over, forgiven, and removed. All of these ways describe how God has given us “the forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation out of sheer grace solely for the sake of Christ’s saving work.” (Heidelberg, 4.021)

Faith is (1) accepting the message of salvation as true and (2) trusting God to apply this salvation to us. Faith is “certain knowledge” and “wholehearted trust,” that is created in us by the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. In faith we accept, receive, and rest “upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.” (Westminster, 6.080)

What Is Not Affirmed

We cannot affirm any effort to earn salvation or work for righteousness—as though God’s favor or acceptance, salvation or righteousness could be obtained any other way than through faith in Jesus Christ.

We cannot affirm any doctrine—

- that asserts that salvation can be obtained through other religions or that other religions have equally valid solutions to the human problems of sin and guilt, or that there is salvation in some other name besides Jesus Christ;
- that denies the radical sinfulness of human beings, their condemnation before a holy God, their lostness apart from Christ, or their need for a Savior;
- that teaches that God saves or will save everybody (or nearly everybody) regardless of their faith in Jesus Christ or whether they hear the gospel or not or whether they put their faith explicitly in Jesus Christ or not.

AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are God’s uniquely revealed and written Word, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and are the church’s first and final authority in all areas of faith and life including theological doctrine, mission, church order, character, ethical behavior, and lifestyle choices.

The Bible speaks to us with the authority of God himself. We seek to understand, love, follow, obey, surrender, and submit to God’s Word—both Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, and the Scriptures, the written Word of God, which bear true and faithful witness to Jesus Christ.

What Is Not Affirmed

Therefore we cannot affirm any doctrine—

- that seeks to invalidate or subvert scriptural teaching concerning what is to be believed or how we are to live;
- that attempts to subordinate biblical authority to any human authority, cultural norm, or ideology—whether religious, ecclesiastical, governmental, political, economic, psychological, sociological, scientific, historical, philosophical, or other—as though the church should listen primarily to another voice than the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ as expressed in Scripture;
- that seeks or asserts a revelation from the Spirit of God which contradicts the Bible as Word of God, or that attempts to separate the Spirit from the Spirit-inspired words of Scripture, or that elevates the authority or modernity of the Spirit’s revelation above the revelation of Scripture;
- that rejects as historical fact the witness of Scripture to the incarnation, birth, ministry, miracles, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ (as, for example, summarized in 1Cor 15:3-7 and Acts 10:38);
- that seeks to follow a “Jesus Christ” apart from the Person, Work, and Will of Jesus Christ revealed in Scripture.
- that regards Scripture as subjectively, but not objectively, God’s written Word, or that maintains the Scriptures *contain* the Word of God, but are not in themselves the Word of God;

We cannot affirm any notion of a Church “reformed and reforming” that moves outside the boundaries of the authority of Christ and confession of his Lordship which are clearly revealed in Scripture.

We cannot affirm any ecclesiology or morality that attempts to subvert the headship of Jesus Christ and the authority of Scripture.

APPENDIX A
COMMON BIBLICAL DOCTRINES:
SCRIPTURE AND CONFSSIONAL REFERENCES

This appendix contains biblical and confessional references on which each doctrine is based.

GOD

Scripture

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. (Deuteronomy 6:4)

I am the LORD, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. (Isaiah 45:5)

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. (Exodus 20:4-5)

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:19)

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you. (2Corinthians 13:13)

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God (Luke 1:35)

But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. (John 14:26)

They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. (Romans 1:23)

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth... (Gen 1:1)

You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created (Rev 4:11)

For the LORD, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth. (Ps 47:2)

To the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. (Jude 1:25)

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. (Rom 8:28)

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ ... In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will. (Eph 1:7-11)

Confessions

Nicene Creed

We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. (1.1)

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified. (1.3)

Scots Confession

We confess and acknowledge one God alone, to whom alone we must cleave, whom alone we must serve, whom only we must worship, and in whom alone we put our trust. Who is eternal, infinite, immeasurable, incomprehensible, omnipotent, invisible; one in substance and yet distinct in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. (3.01)

Heidelberg Catechism

Q.27. What do you understand by the providence of God?

A.27. The almighty and ever-present power of God, whereby he still upholds, as it were by his own hand, heaven and earth together with all creatures... (4.027)

Westminster Confession of Faith

In the unity of the Godhead there be three Persons of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. (6.013)

God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin; nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established. (6.014)

There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection... almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, ...abundant in goodness and truth. God hath all life, glory,

goodness, blessedness, in and of himself, and is alone in and unto himself all-sufficient. (6.011-012)

Brief Statement of Faith

In life and in death we belong to God. Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve. (10.1)

HUMANITY—ORIGINAL RIGHTEOUSNESS AND FALL INTO SIN

Scripture

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Gen 1:26-27,)

One man’s trespass led to condemnation for all...by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners. (Romans 5:18-19)

Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. (Ps 51:5)

No one living is righteous before you. (Ps 143:2)

The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse - who can understand it? (Jeremiah 7:9)

There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one. Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of vipers is under their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes. Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For “no human being will be justified in his sight” by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. (Romans 3:10-23)

For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man. (Matthew 15:19-20)

For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ...but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man

that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Rom 7:18-23)

For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot. (Rom 8:7)

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. (Ephesians 2:1-3)

Confessions

Scots Confession

By this transgression, generally known as original sin, the image of God was utterly defaced in man, and he and his children became by nature hostile to God, slaves to Satan, and servants to sin. And thus everlasting death has had, and shall have, power and dominion over all who have not been, are not, or shall not be reborn from above. (3.03)

Heidelberg Catechism

God created man good and in his image. That is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that he might rightly know God his Creator, love him with his whole heart, and live with him in eternal blessedness, praising and glorifying him. (4.006)

By nature I am prone to hate God and my neighbor. (4.005)

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven, both against our inborn sinfulness and our actual sins, and he will punish them according to his righteous judgment in time and in eternity. (4.010)

Westminster Larger Catechism

The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell, consisteth in the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of that righteousness wherein he was created, and the corruption of his nature, whereby he is utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite unto all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all evil, and that continually; which is commonly called original sin, and from which do proceed all actual transgressions. (7.135)

The Fall brought upon mankind the loss of communion with God, his displeasure and curse; so we are by nature children of wrath, bondslaves to Satan, and justly liable to all punishments in this world and that which is to come. (7.137)

Confession of 1967

In sin, men claim mastery of their own lives, turn against God and their fellow men, and become exploiters and despoilers of the world. They lose their humanity in futile striving and are left in rebellion, despair, and isolation. ...All human virtue...is found to be

infected by self-interest and hostility. All men, good and bad alike, are in the wrong before God and helpless without his forgiveness. Thus all men fall under God's judgment. No one is more subject to that judgment than the man who assumes he is guiltless before God or morally superior to others. (9.12-13)

Brief Statement of Faith

In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God's image, male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community. But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator. Ignoring God's commandments, we violate the image of God in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care. We deserve God's condemnation. (10.3)

JESUS CHRIST – INCARNATION OF THE ETERNAL WORD

Scripture

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. (John 1:1-3, 14-18)

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:15-20)

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. (Hebrews 1:1-3)

For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all—this was attested at the right time. (1Timothy 2:5-6)

And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. (Luke 1:31-35)

That is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself. (2Corinthians 5:19)

Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. (Romans 5:18-19)

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist. (1John 4:2-4)

Confessions

Nicene Creed

We believe...in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made, who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man. (1.1-1.2)

Westminster Confession

The Son of God, the second Person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance, and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man's nature, with all the essential properties and common infirmities thereof; yet without sin: being conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man. (6.044)

Confession of 1967

Jesus Christ is God with man. He is the eternal Son of the Father, who became man and lived among us to fulfill the work of reconciliation. ...In Jesus of Nazareth, true humanity was realized once and for all. (9.07-9.08)

Brief Statement of Faith

We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God. (10.2)

JESUS CHRIST—HIS ATONING WORK

Scripture

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures. (1Cor 15:3)

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us... For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2Cor 5:19,21)

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1Jn 2:2)

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. (1Peter 3:18)

But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. (Heb 9:11-12)

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”. (Gal 3:13)

You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. (Matt 1:21)

And what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Eph 1:19-23)

But we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. (1Cor 1:23-25)

For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. (1Corinthians 2:2)

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Galatians 6:14)

...the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord...(Rom 1:3-4)

And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him. (1 Peter 3:21-22)

Confessions

The Nicene Creed

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. (1.2)

The Apostles' Creed

...Jesus Christ...was crucified, dead and buried; he ascended into heaven; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty... (2.2)

Scots Confession

Christ's death, passion, and burial. That our Lord Jesus offered himself a voluntary sacrifice unto his Father for us, that he suffered contradiction of sinners, that he was wounded and plagued for our transgressions, that he, the clean, innocent Lamb of God, was condemned in the presence of an earthly judge, that we should be absolved before the judgment seat of our God; that he suffered not only the cruel death of the cross, which was accursed by the sentence of God; but also that he suffered for a season the wrath of his Father which sinners had deserved. But yet we avow that he remained the only, well beloved, and blessed Son of his Father even in the midst of his anguish and torment which he suffered in his body and soul to make full atonement for the sins of his people. (3.09)

Heidelberg Catechism

Q.37. What do you understand by the word “suffered”?

A.37. That throughout his life on earth, but especially at the end of it, [Jesus Christ] bore in body and soul the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race, so that by his suffering, as the only expiatory sacrifice, he might redeem our body and soul from everlasting damnation, and might obtain for us God's grace, righteousness, and eternal life. (4.037)

Q.31 Why is he called CHRIST, that is, THE ANOINTED ONE?

A.31 Because he is anointed by God the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit to be *our chief Prophet and Teacher*, fully revealing to us the secret purpose and will of God concerning our redemption; to be *our only High Priest*, having redeemed us by the one sacrifice of his body and ever interceding for us with the Father; and to be *our eternal King*, governing us by his Word and Spirit, and defending and sustaining us in the redemption he has won for us. (4.031)

Confession of '67

God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ is a mystery which the Scriptures describe in various ways. It is called the sacrifice of a lamb, a shepherd's life given for his sheep, atonement by a priest; again it is ransom of a slave, payment of debt, vicarious satisfaction of a legal penalty, and victory over the powers of evil. These are expressions of a truth which remains beyond the reach of all theory in the depths of God's love for man. They reveal the gravity, cost, and sure achievement of God's reconciling work. (9.09)

SALVATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

Scripture

The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:22-26)

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

Yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ. (Galatians 2:16)

By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

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

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

Confessions

Heidelberg Catechism

Q.21. What is true faith?

A.21. It is not only a certain knowledge by which I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in his Word, but also a wholehearted trust which the Holy Spirit creates in me through the gospel, that, not only to others, but to me also, God has given the forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation, out of sheer grace solely for the sake of Christ's saving work.

Q.60. How are you righteous before God?

A.60. Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. In spite of the fact that my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, and have not kept any one of them, and that I am still ever prone to all that is evil, nevertheless, God, without any merit of my own, out of pure grace, grants me the benefits of the perfect expiation of Christ, imputing to me his righteousness and holiness as if I had never committed a single sin or had ever been sinful, having fulfilled myself all the obedience which Christ has carried out for me, if only I accept such favor with a trusting heart.

2nd Helvetic Confession

All of us are by nature sinners and godless, and before God's judgment seat are convicted of godlessness and are guilty of death. But...solely by the grace of Christ and not from any merit of ours or consideration for us, we are justified, that is, absolved from sin and death by God the Judge. ...For Christ took upon himself and bore the sins of the world, and satisfied divine justice. Therefore, solely on account of Christ's sufferings...[God] imputes Christ's righteousness to us as our own. ...Because we receive this justification, not through any works, but through faith in the mercy of God and in Christ, we therefore teach and believe with the apostle that sinful man is justified by faith alone in Christ. ...Faith receives Christ our righteousness and attributes everything to the grace of God in Christ. (5.107-109)

WHAT IS FAITH? Christian faith is not an opinion or human conviction, but a most firm trust and a clear and steadfast assent of the mind, and then a most certain apprehension of the truth of God presented in the Scriptures and in the Apostles' Creed, and thus also of God himself, the greatest good, and especially of God's promise and of Christ, who is the fulfillment of all promises. ...This faith is a pure gift of God. (5.112-113)

Brief Statement of Faith

We trust in God the Holy Spirit, everywhere the giver and renewer of life. The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith.

AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Scripture

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2Timothy 3:16-17)

When you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers. (1Thessalonians 2:13)

[Jesus] answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:4)

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.. (Luke 24:44-45)

Confessions

2nd Helvetic Confession

We believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men. For God himself spoke to the fathers, prophets, and apostles, and still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures. And in this Holy Scripture, the universal Church of Christ has the most complete exposition of all that pertains to a saving faith, and also to the framing of a life acceptable to God; and in this respect it is expressly commanded by God that nothing is to be added to or taken from the same. (5.001)

Scripture is the Word of God. (5.003)

We hold that interpretation of the Scripture to be orthodox and genuine which is gleaned from the Scriptures themselves (from the nature of the language in which they were written, likewise according to the circumstances in which they were set down, and expounded in the light of like and unlike passages and of many and clearer passages) and which agree with the rule of faith and love, and contributes much to the glory of God and man's salvation. (5.010)

Westminster Confession of Faith

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. (6.006)

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself. (6.009)

The Larger (Westminster) Catechism

Q.3. What is the Word of God?

A.3. The holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, the only rule of faith and obedience.

Q.4. How doth it appear that the Scriptures are the Word of God?

A.4. The Scriptures manifest themselves to be the Word of God, by their majesty and purity; by the consent of all the parts, and the scope of the whole, which is to give all glory to God; by their light and power to convince and convert sinners, to comfort and build up believers unto salvation. But the Spirit of God, bearing witness by and with the Scriptures in the heart of man, is alone able fully to persuade it that they are the very word of God. (7.113-114)

Confession of 1967

2. THE BIBLE

The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written. The Scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel. The church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as prophetic and apostolic testimony in which it hears the word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated.

The New Testament is the recorded testimony of apostles to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, and the sending of the Holy Spirit to the Church. The Old Testament bears witness to God's faithfulness in his covenant with Israel and points the way to the fulfillment of his purpose in Christ. The Old Testament is indispensable to understanding the New, and is not itself fully understood without the New.

The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ. The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture.

God's word is spoken to his church today where the Scriptures are faithfully preached and attentively read in dependence on the illumination of the Holy Spirit and with readiness to receive their truth and direction. (9.27-9.30)

SECTION 2

REFORMED DISTINCTIVES

ELECTION FOR SALVATION AND SERVICE

Our salvation and sanctification are based entirely on God’s initiative and God’s grace. It is not primarily about *our* choice but *God’s* choice. The Reformed understanding of election is that God has chosen us *in Christ* for salvation and service—

- To be redeemed,
- To be God’s own “treasured possession,” a holy nation and a kingdom of priests,
- To live holy and exemplary lives, zealous for good works,
- Resulting in praise for the glory of God’s grace.

Our salvation is not an accident we stumble into or a destiny we create. It is God’s gracious purpose for our life and it is for God’s glory.

God has elected us out of grace.

God has elected us from eternity.

We are elected (or predestined) *in Christ*, that is—

Christ is God’s elected Son, chosen to redeem God’s creation and to be Mediator and Savior for humankind. Our election is not direct, but indirect—we are elected on account of Christ, with the result that those who are now grafted into Christ by faith are also elected.

We are elected for a definite purpose—

to glorify God by our redeemed and sanctified life.

Our faith in Christ and our good works are evidence and confirmation that we are elected.

Election is a doctrine intended to reassure Christians of the security of their salvation and of the steadfast love of God for them, and to instill in them a sense of divine purpose and a zeal for good works.

A person may know with complete assurance, on the basis of the promises of Scripture and God’s faithfulness, that if they are trusting in Christ for their salvation, they indeed are in Christ and are elected.

What Is Not Affirmed

We cannot affirm any doctrine—

- that denies God’s initiative in calling persons to God’s self;
- that asserts that all people will ultimately be reconciled to God;
- that asserts a profession of faith without bearing any fruit.

COVENANT AND COVENANT LIFE

Covenant, in the cultural context of the Bible, described the strongest relationship of love and loyalty between persons. It was a solemn relationship and bond, often with explicit oaths and obligations, often sealed solemnly with the blood of sacrifice. Reconciliation after hostility and conflict was often marked by a covenant ceremony. A covenant was entered into by faith as a relationship of trust and solemn promises; it was held together by faithfulness. Covenant faithfulness led to blessing and life; breaking covenant invoked a curse. Covenants described the relationship between rulers and subjects, wife and husband, business partners, neighboring nations. God adapted this covenant model to describe his special relationship and bond with the people he redeemed.

God's covenants had different forms and details at different times in salvation history (for example, with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David), but they reflected a single sovereign and gracious purpose to redeem, sanctify, and preserve a people who belonged to God. The divine covenant was always initiated by God; it was sustained by God's faithfulness in spite of humankind's history of unfaithfulness; it was an expression of God's steadfast love (Heb., *hesed*); and it reached a culmination and fullness in the "new covenant" (Lk 22:20) established and perfected by Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, the promised Messiah, we encounter personally and directly the Mediator of God's perfect and everlasting covenant (Heb 9:15). Jesus has perfectly fulfilled the obligations of the covenant for us; he has demonstrated complete faithfulness to God as a covenant partner. In his substitutionary death he took on himself the curse for our covenant breaking, ended the separation our sins had caused, reconciled us and made us right with God. Those who put their faith in Christ are spiritually united with him, enter the new covenant where there is salvation and redemption, become members of the covenant community called *the church*, and enjoy the covenant promises of eternal life and blessing.

Every believer is called to be a faithful and participating member of a local church, where "the community of the new covenant" has local expression and where they can be disciplined into holiness and maturity. The community of the new covenant is to be a demonstration of the supernatural reality and power of the kingdom of God—what the world looks like and might become where God is acknowledged as King; a community of love and wholeness; a ministry extending the healing, deliverance, and grace that marked the life of Jesus and his disciples.

What Is Not Affirmed

We cannot affirm any doctrine—

- that promotes a covenant life which is to be lived out in a solitary manner, devoid of community;

- that suggests that covenant life need not be different than the life of the unbeliever in any profound way;
- that would seek to lay the foundation of our covenant life on anything other than or contrary to God's Word.

STEWARDSHIP

God has given us all that we have and all that we are. He charges us with the responsibility of using all our abilities and gifts in his faithful service and to his glory—and especially to further the work and mission of the church, to relieve suffering and help the poor, to resist the devil and overcome evil. In particular God has ordered us to manage and care for creation as grateful stewards and obedient servants.

Jesus Christ is Lord of every area of our life—our spiritual life and our physical life; our social life including marriage, politics, justice, and culture; our intellectual life; our work life and our recreational life; the use of our bodies, our possessions, our resources, and our money. We are to be stewards of all of these things to manifest and extend the kingdom of God in the world, to extend the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth, and to bring glory to the name of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.

What Is Not Affirmed

We cannot affirm any witness of the Church—

- That considers it permissible to assert human sovereignty (individual or collective) or to claim exclusive human ownership of any part of God's creation, animate or inanimate.
- That claims Jesus has given His power to Christians for the purpose of prospering materially in this world (Prosperity Theology), or that God has in any way linked works or faith directly or wholly with worldly prosperity.

TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIETY

God's redeeming and reconciling work in the world was accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and continues through the church, the body of Christ, God's agent for the transformation of society, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven in the world (G-1.0200).

Jesus Christ, as the Lord of the church, calls the church into being, declares its mission, and supernaturally equips it for its work. Its mission is:

- **To proclaim the good news of salvation by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, leading persons to repentance, acceptance of Christ as Savior and Lord, and new life as his disciples;**
- **To demonstrate new life in Christ tangibly through its love for one another and the quality of its common life together, sharing in worship, fellowship, and nurture, practicing a deepened life of prayer and service under the guidance of the Holy Spirit;**
- **To be the provisional demonstration of the new reality God intends for humanity;**
- **To participate in God’s activity in the world through its life for others.**
- **To be a constant voice of prophetic challenge and inspiration, calling the church and civil government to actions designed to alleviate discrimination, poverty and hunger, strengthen sexual responsibility, conserve creation, and seek alternatives to war, violence and narrow nationalistic agendas.**

The people of God are called to be transformed and to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God. The church is to commit itself fully to this mission, waiting for and demonstrating the Kingdom of God until the Lord’s coming again.

What Is Not Affirmed

We cannot affirm any witness of the Church—

- **that distorts the gospel message or holds it captive to culture;**
- **that seeks justice apart from the truth of Christ;**
- **that elevates sociology, psychology, education or any other discipline above the clear witness of Scripture;**
- **that self-righteously appeals to others to live faithful and obedient lives rather than acknowledging the Church’s reliance on the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit in its own life and witness;**
- **that is motivated by anything other than the love of Christ.**

SACRAMENTS

The church receives from the Lord Jesus Christ two sacred and symbolic actions, called sacraments, which enact and perform (symbolize and seal) the promises of the gospel. These sacraments are Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Baptism is the sign and seal of incorporation into Christ and of the washing away of sin through his sacrifice. The Lord’s Supper, using bread and wine, is the sign and seal of our ongoing communion with the living Christ and of his life continuing to nourish us. Both sacraments point to and remind us of the holy sacrifice of Christ for us. The Holy Spirit uses these sacraments—the common signs of water and of bread and

wine, combined with the promises in the gospel of eternal life and forgiveness through Christ—to convey grace, salvation, and the real presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, which are received in faith by the believing community in their worship together.

What Is Not Affirmed

We cannot affirm—

- that the physical body and blood of Jesus are actually present in the Lord's Supper;
- that there are other sacraments besides the two instituted by the Lord Jesus;
- that these sacraments are mere symbols and do not involve a supernatural presence of Christ or do not supernaturally perform what they signify, that is, *wash from sins* and *nourish us with Christ's very life*;
- that the sacraments confer grace regardless of whether the faith of the believer (or the faith of a baptizing parent) is present.

APPENDIX B
REFORMED DISTINCTIVES:
SCRIPTURE AND CONFSSIONAL REFERENCES

This appendix contains biblical and confessional references on which each distinctive is based.

ELECTION FOR SALVATION AND SERVICE

Scripture

As he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. (Ephesians 1:4-7)

In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:11-12)

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last. (Jn 15:5,8,16)

[God] saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began. (2Timothy 1:9)

For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. (Ephesians 2:10)

In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. (Ps 139:16)

Confessions

Scots Confession

That same eternal God and Father, who by grace alone chose us in his Son Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world was laid, appointed him to be our head, our brother, our pastor, and the great bishop of our souls. (3.08)

2nd Helvetic Confession

From eternity God has freely, and of his mere grace, without any respect to men, predestinated or elected the saints whom he wills to save in Christ. (5.052)

Not on account of any merit of ours, God has elected us, not directly, but in Christ, and on account of Christ, in order that those who are now ingrafted into Christ by faith, might also be elected. (5.053)

The preaching of the gospel is to be heard, and it is to be believed; and it is to be held as beyond doubt that if you believe and are in Christ, you are elected. ...Let Christ, therefore, be the looking glass, in whom we may contemplate our predestination. (5.059-60)

COVENANT AND COVENANT LIFE

Scripture

God's covenant with Noah (Genesis 6:18) included a promise to never again destroy the earth by flood (Genesis 9:8-17).

God's covenant with Abraham included a promise of land and descendents (Genesis 17:1-8).

God's covenant with the people of Israel included release from Egyptian bondage (Exodus 19:3-6).

God's covenant with David included a promise that his descendents would have an everlasting kingdom and that his throne would be established forever (2Samuel 7:12-16).

Through the prophets, God did speak of a new covenant to come—God's same covenant of relationship, but fulfilled in a new way (Jeremiah 23:5-6; 31:31-34; Isaiah 9:6-7).

¹⁵For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant...(Hebrews 9:15)

Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise...But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (Ephesians 2:12-13)

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation... (I Peter 2:9,10)

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

Confessions

Scots Confession

As we believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, so we firmly believe that from the beginning there has been, now is, and to the end of the world shall be, one Kirk... (3.16)

Second Helvetic Confession

What is the Church? The Church is an assembly of the faithful called or gathered out of the world; ...those who truly know and rightly worship and serve the true God in Christ the Savior, by the Word and Holy Spirit, and who by faith are partakers of all benefits which are freely offered through Christ. (5.125-5.126)

The Westminster Confession of Faith

Man, by his Fall, having made himself incapable of life by that [first] covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein he freely offered unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ. (6.039)

The Visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel...consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children, and is the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, through which men are ordinarily saved and union with which is essential to their best growth and service. (6.141)

The Shorter Catechism

Q 20. Did God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery?

A. God, having out of his mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a covenant of grace, to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer. (7.020)

The Larger Catechism

Q. 31. With whom was the covenant of grace made?

A. The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed. (7.141)

Q. 32. How is the grace of God manifested in the second covenant?

A. The grace of God is manifested in the second covenant, in that he freely provideth and offereth to sinners a mediator, and life and salvation by him; and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in him, promiseth and giveth his Holy Spirit to all his elect...(7.142)

Q. 35. How is the covenant of grace administered under the New Testament?

A. Under the New Testament, when Christ the substance was exhibited, the same covenant of grace was, and still is to be, administered in the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism, and the Lord's Supper...(7.145)

q. 36. Who is the Mediator of the covenant of grace?

A. The only Mediator of the covenant of grace is the Lord Jesus Christ...(7.146)

Confession of 1967

To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as his reconciling community.... The church maintains continuity with the apostles and with Israel by faithful obedience to his call. (9.31)

STEWARDSHIP

Scripture

What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift? (1Corinthians 4:7)

Above all, maintain constant love for one another...Be hospitable to one another...serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received...(1Peter 4:8-10)

The earth is the LORD'S and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; (Psalm 24:1)

He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. (Titus 2:14)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Romans 12:1)

Confessions

The Westminster Larger Catechism

Q. 141 What are the duties required in the eight commandment?

A. The duties required are:...Giving and lending freely, according to our abilities and the necessities of others...[generosity]

Q. 142 What are the sins forbidden in the Eighth Commandment?

A. The sins forbidden (include)... defrauding ourselves of the due use and comfort of that estate which God has given us [miserliness].

The Confession of 1967

“The church calls every man to use his abilities, his positions, and the fruits of technology as gifts entrusted to him by God for the maintenance of his family and the advancement of the common welfare.” (9.46)

Brief Statement of Faith

“But we rebel against God; we hide from our creator... and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care...” (33,38)

TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIETY

Scripture

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20,)

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God’s wrath. (John 3:38)

Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, (Heb 5:8-9)

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (Joel 2:32)

Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked. (Ps 82:3-4)

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed. Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. (2 Peter 3:10-13)

Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a

stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ (Matt 25:34-36)

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:16-21)

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:36-37)

Confessions

Westminster Confession of Faith

Since there is no other way of salvation than that revealed in the gospel and since in the divinely established and ordinary method of grace faith cometh by hearing the Word of God, Christ hath commissioned his Church to go into all the world and to make disciples of all nations. All believers are, therefore, under obligation to sustain the ordinances of the Christian religion where they are already established, and to contribute by their prayers, gifts, and personal efforts to the extension of the kingdom of Christ throughout the whole earth. (6.058)

The Larger Catechism

The duty which God requireth of man is obedience to his revealed will. (7.201)

The duties required in the Eighth Commandment are: truth, faithfulness, and justice in contracts and commerce between man and man...and an endeavor by all just and lawful means to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others, as well as our own. (7.251)

Confession of ‘67

God’s reconciling work in Jesus Christ and the mission of reconciliation to which he has called his church are the heart of the gospel in any age. (9.06)

Life is a gift to be received with gratitude and a task to be pursued with courage. Man is free to seek his life within the purpose of God: to develop and protect the resources of

nature for the common welfare, to work for justice and peace in society, and in other ways to use his creative powers for the fulfillment of human life. (9.17)

In each time and place, there are particular problems and crises through which God calls the church to act. The church, guided by the Spirit, humbled by its own complicity and instructed by all attainable knowledge, seeks to discern the will of God and learn how to obey in these concrete situations. (9.43) See also 9.44-9.46.

A Brief Statement of Faith

In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to...hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom and peace. (10.4)

SACRAMENTS

Scripture

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42)

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3-4)

¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1Corinthians 12:13)

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1Corinthians 11:23-26)

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? (1Corinthians 10:16)

Confessions

Heidelberg Catechism

Q.66 What are the Sacraments?

A.66 They are visible, holy signs and seals instituted by God in order by their use he may the more disclose and seal to us the promise of the gospel, namely, that because of the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross he graciously grants us the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. (4.066)

Christ has instituted this external washing with water and by it has promised that I am as certainly washed with his blood and Spirit from the uncleanness of my soul and from all my sins. (4.069)

Q.74 Are infants also to be baptized?

A.74 Yes, because they, as well as their parents, are included in the covenant and belong to the people of God. (4.074)

2nd Helvetic Confession

From the beginning, God added to the preaching of his Word in his Church Sacraments or sacramental signs. ... Sacraments are mystical symbols, or holy rites, or sacred actions, instituted by God himself, consisting of his Word, of signs and of things signified, whereby in the Church he keeps in mind and from time to time recalls the great benefits he has shown to men; whereby he also seals his promises, and outwardly represents, and, as it were, offers unto our sight those things which inwardly he performs for us, and so strengthens and increases our faith through the working of God's Spirit in our hearts. (5.169)

The principal thing which God promises in all Sacraments and to which all the godly in all ages direct their attention... is Christ the Savior. (5.175)

The body of Christ is in heaven at the right hand of the Father; and therefore our hearts are to be lifted up on high, and not to be fixed on the bread. ... Yet the Lord is not absent from the Church when she celebrates the Supper. The sun, which is absent from us in the heavens, is notwithstanding effectually present among us. How much more is the Sun of Righteousness, Christ, although in his body he is absent from us in heaven, present with us, not corporeally, but spiritually, by his vivifying operation. ... Whence it follows that we do not have the Super without Christ. (5.205)

Westminster Shorter Catechism

Q.94 What is Baptism?

A. 94 Baptism is a sacrament, wherein the washing with water, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, doth signify and seal our ingrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord's.

Confession of '67

Baptism with water represents not only cleansing from sin, but a dying with Christ and a joyful rising with him to new life. It commits all Christians to die each day to sin and live for righteousness. ... By baptism, individuals are publicly received into the church to share in its life and ministry. (9.51)

The Lord's Supper is a celebration of the reconciliation of men with God and with one another, in which they joyfully eat and drink together at the table of their Savior.

...Partaking in him as they eat the bread and drink the wine in accordance with Christ's appointment, they receive from the risen and living Lord the benefits of his death and resurrection. (9.52)

Brief Statement of Faith

We trust in God the Holy Spirit...[who] engages us through the Word proclaimed, claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation. (10.4)

SECTION 3

QUESTIONS FOR EXAMINATION

No one may be required to subscribe to any explicit formulation. But the Presbytery of Santa Barbara earnestly commends this summary. We believe a list of essential tenets of the Reformed faith *includes* these doctrines and distinctives, based on the scriptures and confessions shown here. We urge nominees and candidates to look them over so that we may have a conversation about them.

In that conversation questions that clarify a candidate's theology may be raised. These questions then become the way of fulfilling our responsibility to examine a candidate to discern whether his or her theology truly demonstrates that they have received and adopted a Christian faith that is authentically Reformed.

Scruples

In “the old days,” candidates for ministry would be questioned on their fidelity to the Westminster standards. They would be asked to declare scruples—areas of doctrine where they parted company with Westminster. Are there scruples you would declare with respect to the major themes of Reformed theology expressed in the Book of Confessions?

As you look through this summary of doctrines and distinctives, would you take significant exception to any of the doctrines summarized here? Would you exclude any of them from your own list of essentials or distinctives—and on what grounds, biblical or otherwise? Would you add anything to the list?

As you examine this list of doctrines and distinctives, would you say of them that you sincerely receive and adopt them as expressing essential tenets of the Reformed faith and also your faith?

Trinity

Do you consider the doctrine of the Trinity an “essential tenet”? Some consider it an archaic or obsolete vestige of an old orthodoxy. What relevance does this doctrine continue to have, if any? Why do you believe in the doctrine of the Trinity—and why is it important?

As an issue of theological integrity and conscience, are you a Trinitarian Christian in the sense expressed in the Scots Confession (3.01), the Nicene Creed, the Westminster Confession (6.013), and the Brief Statement (10.1)?

Some theologians have proposed replacing Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer or Comforter. Is this a valid reformulation of the Trinity?

Of the world's major religions, only Christianity seems to be Trinitarian. Other religions are either radically monotheist (Judaism and Islam) or polytheist (animism, Hinduism). Is Christianity's revelation of God fundamentally in harmony with or different from these other major religions?

Humanity/Sin

A classic Reformed tenet is "total depravity." What did the Reformers understand by this doctrine? Do you consider it biblical or a pessimistic distortion of real human nature?

Do you consider the notion of "sin" unhelpful or obsolete?

How would you describe the human situation that requires a savior or salvation?

Do you think people are, by nature, basically good, bad, or neither?

What is the origin of sin?

John 3:16 has the phrase "shall not perish." What is this referring to?

Do you believe that there are real and eternal issues of judgment at stake in life?

Reference Westminster (7.137) and Scots (3.03) on judgment. What do you think about this formulation of sin and judgment?

The Brief Statement (10.3) says: "We deserve God's condemnation." Do you agree with this assessment of human guilt?

Christology

How would you summarize the core truth about Jesus Christ in the Nicene Creed?

According to the Nicene Creed, who is Jesus Christ—and why does it matter?

What scriptures support a Nicene Christology?

As an issue of theological integrity and conscience, are you in agreement with the Nicene formulation (repeated in all the Reformation confessions, such as Westminster 6.044, and in C'67 9.07-08 and Brief Statement 10.2) that Jesus Christ is the unique incarnation of the eternal Son and "very God from very God"? That is, that he had an eternal divine preexistence before he "came down from heaven" and was incarnate as a human being?

Referencing John 1:1-18 and Colossians 1:15-20, what do you make of these "superhuman" descriptions of Christ?

Christianity has Jesus Christ. Is he a better or clearer revelation of God or savior than are found in other religions?

Do you consider the miracle stories of Jesus' life—such as healing the sick, raising the dead, casting out demons—to be historically true?

Do you believe Jesus really died on the Cross and was bodily resurrected by the power of God as the scriptures describe—or do you consider this a mythical formulation or "faith event" of the early church that had no actual phenomenological basis?

How do you understand the phrase from the Apostles' Creed: "conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary" (2.2)?

Do you believe the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are historically true?

What does it mean that Jesus Christ is “Lord”?

Reformed Christology often uses the phrase “fully God and fully human.” (For example, Brief Statement 10.4.) What is the origin of this formulation? Is this any longer a relevant phrase describing Jesus Christ—and if so, why is it important?

How important is Jesus to the church’s worship, proclamation, life, and mission?

Atonement

What is your understanding of the atoning work of Christ?

Scripture speaks variously of Christ’s atonement—he died for our sins (1Cor 15:3); he who knew no sin became sin on our behalf (2Cor 5:21); he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1Jn 2:2); he took the punishment for our sins and to satisfy God’s righteous anger (Rom 3:25); he suffered to bring us to God (1Pet 3:18); on the cross he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing (Gal 3:13); he gave his life as a ransom (Mark 10:45). What do you understand by these phrases? Are they true or helpful? What do they mean to you personally?

Some recent theologians have considered this sacrifice and atonement language primitive, barbaric, violent, and unworthy of God. What do you think?

How central is the death and resurrection of Christ to the Christian message?

How does the death of Christ accomplish our salvation?

What is your personal relationship to the cross of Christ?

Salvation by Grace through Faith

Many regard the doctrine of “justification by faith” to be the central Reformation tenet. What does it mean?

In one sentence, use the words *grace*, *faith*, *righteousness*, *Christ*, and *salvation* to explain “justification.”

Look at Heidelberg Q21, *What is true faith?* Explain the Reformed themes set forth in this classic formulation of faith.

What is the relationship between Christ’s death on the cross, my faith, and justification?

What is the difference between justification and salvation?

Do people need to be saved? What does salvation mean?

What do you make of the Bible’s many declarations that Christ is the unique and sole Mediator and Savior (such as John 14:6, 1Jn 5:11-12, and Acts 4:12)?

Based on the Bible and our Reformed confessions, is it your conviction that everyone is “saved”? Is there salvation apart from Christ?

A person is uncertain whether he or she is a Christian or “saved” and turns to you for help. What would you explain or do that corresponds to your own understanding of the gospel and salvation?

What is the gospel of Jesus Christ?

What is your understanding of heaven and hell?

Are all religions essentially different but equally valid paths to God?

Scripture

The Westminster Catechism says, “the holy scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, the only rule of faith and obedience.” Do you agree with that statement of biblical authority? Do you consider Scripture “the only rule” of faith and obedience? In your view, are there other words of God from other sources than Scripture that carry comparable authority—such as the inner witness of conscience or personal revelation from the Spirit, or scientific research or holy writings from other religions?

Explain the authority of Scripture in your own words.

What does the Bible say about its own authority?

Which of our confessions best expresses your own doctrine of biblical authority?

Inerrant, infallible, trustworthy, authoritative—is there a good word or phrase that best describes for you the inspiration and authority of Scripture?

As a prospective “minister of the Word,” how well do you know the Bible’s content? Have you read it closely in its entirety? What disciplines and habits of Bible reading and study do you observe?

Elder nominees: What experiences have you had in Bible study, leading a Bible study, or teaching the Bible? (Reference G-6.0304, “They should cultivate their ability to teach the Bible.”)

Can you recite the 10 commandments? Where can you find them in the Bible? Where is the *Shema*? “The Lord is my shepherd.” Where is the Lord’s Prayer? Which Gospel would you turn to to find the birth narrative of Jesus, the Great Commission, the Great Commandment, the Sermon on the Mount, the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the story of the raising of Lazarus? Which New Testament book is primarily an exploration of the relationship between law and gospel? Which New Testament book explores in detail how Christ fulfills the Old Covenant system of priesthood and sacrifice? Where can you find “the fruit of the Spirit,” the “armor of God,” the famous “love chapter” (“love is patient...”), the passage about Christ emptying himself and “every knee shall bow,” the gallery of Old Testament heroes of faith? Where is a good description of the deity of Christ...the meaning of Christ’s death...the importance of Christ’s resurrection...and justification by faith?

Sovereignty of God

How important is God's sovereignty in your theology and faith?

The Westminster Catechism says the chief end of human beings is to glorify God. Do you agree? What does this have to do with God's sovereignty?

Somebody in your Christian Ed class says, "God is sovereign. So what?" How do you respond?

What is the Reformed belief regarding the sovereignty of God? How do you experience God's sovereignty in your life?

If a parishioner came to you and said "With all of the evil in the world, God is either weak or just doesn't care anymore." How would you respond?

How does the problem of evil relate to the doctrine of the Sovereignty of God?

While justification is associated with Luther, God's sovereignty is often associated with Calvin. What important Reformed themes or teachings flow from this emphasis on sovereignty?

Election

If we are elected to salvation, does it matter whether we preach the gospel or not? Why should we preach the gospel and urge people to believe?

A woman is a passionate worshipper, Bible-believer, and church-goer, but is anxious about whether she is truly elect and going to heaven. She asks you, "How can I know if I am elected?"

"Election" is a strong Reformed theme. What do we understand by it?

What teachings or emphases of John Calvin do you appreciate in our Reformed heritage?

A person made a "decision for Christ" 20 years ago in youth group. There hasn't been any interest or involvement in church or God for the last 10 years. What would you tell them (or their Christian spouse) about how secure their salvation is?

Covenant Life/Stewardship

What is distinctively Reformed about our understanding of covenant life and stewardship?

H. Richard Niebuhr described three different Christian approaches to culture—Christ *against* culture, Christ *over* culture, Christ *transforming* culture. Which of these three is distinctively Reformed—and why?

Two huge Bible themes are *covenant* and *the kingdom of God*. What is your understanding of the relationship between these two themes? How do they come together in Christ? What is the church's role in *covenant* and *God's kingdom*?

What does it mean that Christ is the Lord of the whole of life? How is a Reformed understanding of this different from an historic Lutheran or Roman Catholic understanding?

What is a Reformed understanding of “secular work” as a vocation or call?

The Church's Mission and the Transformation of Society

How would you summarize the church's mission?

What is the gospel of Jesus Christ—in 3 or 4 sentences?

The first evangelistic crusades by the early church demanded that people repent and that there was salvation in no one else but Jesus Christ. Is it time for the church to have a more inclusive and culturally sensitive message?

What right do we have telling people of other religions to believe in Jesus?

What does the Bible say about the church's responsibility to the rest of the world—and do you agree? What is your theology of “world mission”?

How have you personally been involved in the evangelization of the world (Mark 16:15, Matt 28:18-9, Acts 1:8)?

What does the promotion of social righteousness have to do with the church's mission?

What does “the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world” mean?

Should the church expect to see miraculous works happen today like they did in Jesus' time? Jesus and his disciples spent a lot of time healing the sick and casting out demons. Is this still part of the church's mission?

Sacraments

The Reformed tradition has some distinctive teachings about the sacraments vis-à-vis Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Anabaptist theology. How would you describe and champion the Reformed position? What advantages does it have? What practical difference does it make?

How would you justify infant baptism biblically and theologically? How do you feel personally about infant baptism? Do you have a preferred mode of baptism? How would you counsel a parent requesting infant dedication rather than baptism?

Does baptism guarantee a person is saved? How do you think Calvin would answer this question?

Does anything *supernatural* happen in the Lord's Supper? Is the bread and wine actually changed into something? Is Christ really present in the sacrament? What should I be thinking and doing to get the most out of Holy Communion?

Related Questions

Sanctification

Reformed theology historically holds a doctrine of total depravity. What do we believe about the possibility of real change, transformation, and holiness in this life? Describe the individual, social, and cosmic dimensions of this understanding of sanctification.

Should a Christian really expect to see and experience a supernatural dimension to their life? Why? What, specifically?

What is holiness? How do we grow in holiness?

Is it possible to attain moral and spiritual perfection in our present life?

Are the miraculous gifts of the Spirit listed in 1 Corinthians 12-14 available to the church today? If so, how should they be exercised by the body of Christ?

Priesthood of All Believers

In the Reformed view of the church, who is responsible for doing ministry?

What does the term "priesthood of all believers" mean to you?

Scripturally, where does the Reformed tradition get the idea of a "priesthood of all believers"?

How might the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers determine how you structure the ministry of your new church?

Theological Challenges

What do you consider the biggest theological challenges the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. is facing today?