

Trinity Presbytery Committee on Preparation for Ministry

Guidelines and Procedures¹

I. Introduction

It is the policy of Trinity Presbytery to require that those seeking ordination in the PC(USA) within our presbytery be held to a high standard of preparation and screening. The goal of the below policies is to call all those seeking ordination to holy living and diligent preparation for discerning their call, and to further the peace, unity, and purity of Trinity Presbytery and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Outlining this set of guidelines for the process of preparing for ministry is essential, as the Committee on Preparation for Ministry (CoPM) is a credentialing committee of our presbytery. CoPM performs a legitimate and necessary gatekeeping function that has been delegated to them by Trinity Presbytery, having been charged with examining the suitability for the responsibilities for ordered ministry of those under care. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that a clear set of guidelines be used in this task.

Further, our historic principles of church government explicitly state that “every Christian Church, or union or association of particular churches [*such as Trinity Presbytery*], is entitled to declare the terms of admission into its communion, and the qualifications of its ministers and members...” (F-3.0102). With this in mind, this document represents a good-faith attempt to declare the “terms of admission” into our communion. While it is not our task to judge an individual’s sincerity of faith or dispute his/her right to believe what he/she chooses, it is our task to determine whether an individual has gifts for ministry, leads a life worthy of the Gospel he/she proclaims, and is Reformed in his/her theology. We firmly believe that being a Reformed minister *means something*. We owe it, in integrity, to our members to be able to declare what it means. Based on the Book of Order, our confessions, although “subordinate to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as Scriptures bear witness to him,” are the standards by which “the church declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do” (F-2.01 – 2.02).

While pressing for confessional fidelity, we are occasionally challenged by a historic phrase from our tradition and the Book of Order: “God alone is the Lord

¹ This document has used and adapted portions of San Diego Presbytery’s *Essential Tenets and Reformed Distinctives* by permission.

of the conscience.” The implication is that no one but God may bind our theological conscience in terms of what is to be believed. *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.

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*. Being an ordained Presbyterian means doing ministry within specific theological boundaries:

It is to be recognized, however, that in entering the ordered ministries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), one chooses to exercise freedom of conscience within certain bounds. His or her conscience is captive to the Word of God as interpreted in the standards of the church so long as he or she continues to seek, or serve in, ordered ministry. The decision as to whether a person has departed from essentials of Reformed faith and polity is made initially by the individual concerned but ultimately becomes the responsibility of the council in which he or she is a member. (G-2.0105)

Therefore, as our constitution indicates: (1) becoming an officer imposes limits on our theological liberty; (2) our confessions are the authoritative standard for interpreting the Bible; (3) as long as an officer is in office, he/she is bound by that authority and those standards; (4) determining whether a person is theologically in or out of bounds is initially the responsibility of that individual; and (5) evaluating an individual’s confessional integrity is ultimately the presbytery’s responsibility. When a person chooses to begin the process for ordained ministry in the PC(USA), he/she must in good faith and with clear conscience receive and adopt our confessional identity. We do not have the right to pick and choose the foundational truths we believe in, with the expectation that other foundational truths can be ignored or will soon be changed. That is bad faith.

It is under the authority of Scripture and our constitution that we begin this task of creating guidelines. Familiarity with and compliance with this document is the responsibility of all parties. Those seeking to be enrolled under the care of the CoPM will be provided a copy of this document, along with the other documents adopted by the CoPM as part of this document, upon their first meeting with the committee.

II. The Trinity Presbytery Process for Ministry Preparation Checklist

- a. The CoPM has adopted the *Checklist of Completion of Steps in the Preparation for Ministry Process* as a guideline for proper procedure.
- b. In addition to the steps listed on the above mentioned form, the following procedures have been adopted by the CoPM:
 - i. Those wishing to be enrolled as an inquirer must first be active in the work and worship of a congregation within Trinity Presbytery for at least six months. *Exceptions will be made for those whose home church is in the process of requesting dismissal from the PC(USA), as long as the individual wishing to be enrolled has been active in the work and worship of that church for at least six months.*
 - ii. Before being enrolled as a candidate in Trinity Presbytery, the individual wishing to enter candidacy must complete a psychological examination at a presbytery-approved testing location. The results of this examination will be reviewed by the CoPM before seeking presbytery's approval to enroll the individual as a candidate. While the psychological examination is required for candidacy, it is highly recommended that this testing be done before or directly after being enrolled as an inquirer.
 - iii. While under care of Trinity Presbytery, an individual must meet annually with the CoPM for an evaluation. Candidates will remain under care, even after they have been certified ready to receive a call, until they officially receive a call or decide to withdraw from the process.
 - iv. All necessary paperwork must be completed and submitted to the CoPM at least two weeks before the date of evaluation.
 - v. Before being approved ready to receive a call, a candidate is required:
 1. To successfully pass all ordination examinations.
 - a. After failure to pass an exam after two attempts, a candidate may request that he/she be given an alternative examination to ascertain the readiness of the candidate for ministry in the areas covered by the standard ordination exam.
 - b. Presbytery must approve all alternative examinations by three quarters vote.
 2. To complete a unit of clinical pastoral education (CPE) at an accredited site.
 3. To be under care of the presbytery for at least two years, including at least one year as a candidate.
 4. To receive a final assessment, in which the candidate must present a one-page faith statement, a one-page faith journey, a written sermon with exegesis, an official transcript of his/her grades from

seminary, a copy of his/her CPE evaluation, and a rough draft of his/her personal information form (PIF).

III. Educational Requirements

- a. Trinity Presbytery requires the successful completion of a Masters of Divinity program for a candidate to be classified as ready to receive a call. While a final assessment may be done prior to completion of a Masters of Divinity program, a candidate's ability to receive a call will be pending upon receiving his/her final transcripts.
- b. Those discerning a calling in the PC(USA) under the care of the Trinity Presbytery CoPM will ordinarily attend a PC(USA) Theological Seminary or a denominational seminary of a church in full communion with the PC(USA).
 - i. Those attending a non-PC(USA) seminary may be required by the CoPM to complete additional coursework in biblical languages, exegesis, polity, and Reformed theology from an approved seminary.

IV. Guidelines for Writing a Statement of Faith

- a. The statement of faith written by the inquirer and candidate and required for annual consultations, candidacy, and final assessment is to reflect what the inquirer or candidate believes about each of the topics listed below. The process of writing this statement will involve wrestling with these key theological issues and expressing personal beliefs in a lucid manner. If quotations from sources are included, they must be cited in the footnotes.
- b. The statement of faith will address the listed tenets and may include other concepts that the candidate considers necessary. The statement of faith should not exceed one page.
 - i. Triune God (include statements describing your understanding of the three persons of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).
 - ii. God as creator of all things and God's relationship to creation and humanity in its fallen state.
 - iii. The person and work of Jesus Christ, including an understanding of the incarnation, atonement, resurrection, and ascension.
 - iv. The Holy Spirit and the Spirit's relationship to justification, sanctification, and the empowerment of the Church.
 - v. The Church and Her mission, including the role of the sacraments.
 - vi. Scripture, its origin, use, authority, and interpretation for you personally and for the Church.

V. Guidelines for Writing a Journey of Faith Statement

- a. The journey of faith document written by the inquirer and candidate and required for annual consultations, candidacy, and final assessment is to include at least the following biographical information in narrative format:
 - i. Family of origin and current family composition.
 - ii. History of education, including names of institutions and degrees earned.
 - iii. Experiences that provided turning points in the individual's discovery of faith and calling.
 - 1. Meaningful experiences as a member of specific churches.
 - 2. Meaningful mission experiences.
 - iv. Development of the sense of call to service through participation in the church. What is your current sense of call in the next step of your journey?
- b. The journey of faith statement should not exceed one page.

VI. Standards for Ethical Conduct

- a. An individual discerning a call into ordained ministry within Trinity Presbytery will be held to the same high standards as an ordained officer. As the Book of Order clearly distinguishes, the only essential requirement for membership is a profession of faith (G-1.0302), while the requirements of ordered ministry are understandably stricter (G-2.0104). Since those under care are discerning a call to a position of leadership, they will be held to the same standards as those in leadership positions in the PC(USA). In this way, they will demonstrate suitability for ministry.
- b. The CoPM has adopted the *Standards of Ethical Conduct* as approved by Trinity Presbytery. All those under care of Trinity Presbytery will receive a copy of this document and will be held to these standards as they are presented in the document. Failure to demonstrate a life of dedicated discipleship, as identified in the *Standards of Ethical Conduct*, will be cause for dismissal from the care process of Trinity Presbytery's CoPM.

VII. Final Assessment

- a. In order to examine a candidate for a final assessment in a fair and consistent manner, CoPM believes that we must have a common understanding of what the essential tenets are of Reformed theology. We recognize that there is more to the Christian faith than just doctrine. It is about God finding us and our finding salvation, community, healing, love, and life in all its fullness. But these wonderful realities are founded on certain truths revealed in God's Word. That's why theology matters and why doctrine is foundational and critically important. Therefore, before we list examination questions, we have listed 6 essential tenets and 7 Reformed distinctives (that by no means represent an exhaustive list) that

will inform the standards we expect those under care to sincerely adopt and receive.²

SECTION 1 **ESSENTIAL TENETS**

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 God and are called according to his purpose. God opposes all evil and will certainly triumph over it and bring creation to a glorious consummation.**

***Grace.* God is a God of love. In grace, God chooses to show love and mercy. 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.**

² It should be noted that we do not intend for this document to be a subscription document. Rather, it will be used as a tool for theological assessment from which the committee will be responsible for determining if there is any serious departure from confessional standards. Further, we understand that this is a working document, which is subject to change with approval of Trinity Presbytery as the Holy Spirit leads us and gives us clearer understanding.

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.

Scripture

Genesis 1:1; Exodus 20:4-5; Deuteronomy 6:4; Psalm 47:2; Isaiah 45:5
Matthew 28:19; Luke 1:35; John 14:26; Romans 1:23; 8:28; 2 Corinthians 13:14;
Ephesians 1:7-11; Jude 1:25; Revelation 4:11

Confessions

Nicene Creed 1.1, 1.3
Scots Confession 3.01
Heidelberg Catechism 4.027
Westminster Confession of Faith 6.011-6.014
Larger Catechism 7.01
Brief Statement of Faith 10.1

What Is Not Affirmed

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 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’s uncreated glory 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 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, worshipping, 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 fully 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.

Scripture

Genesis 1:26-27; Psalms 51:5, 143:2; Jeremiah 17:9

Matthew 15:19-20; Romans 3:10-23; 5:18-19; 7:18-23; 8:7; Ephesians 2:1-3

Confessions

Scots Confession 3.03

Heidelberg Catechism 4.005, 4.006, 4.010

Larger Catechism 7.135, 7.137

Confession of 1967 9.12-13

Brief Statement of Faith 10.3

What Is Not Affirmed

- The notion that human nature is basically good and self-redeemable through good effort, discipline, improved environment, etc.
- The notion that man's defective nature is the result of heredity or environment to such a degree that human beings are not morally responsible for their nature or behavior.
- 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 (John 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 was “all of God in a human body” (Colossians 1:19) and “God with us” (Matthew 1:23)—a living tabernacle of God's holy presence, “full of grace and truth” (John 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, ascension, and exaltation. 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!” (Revelation 22:20)

Scripture

Matthew 1:23; Luke 1:31-35; John 1:1-3, 14-18; Romans 5:18-19; 2 Corinthians 5:19;
Colossians 1:15-20; 1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 1:1-3; 1 John 4:2-4

Confessions

Nicene Creed 1.1-1.2
Westminster Confession of Faith 6.044
Confession of 1967 9.07-9.08
Brief Statement of Faith 10.2

What Is Not Affirmed

Any doctrine—

- that affirms the deity but not the full humanity of Christ, or the humanity but not Christ’s 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;
- that attempts to supplement the authoritative revelation of the Old and New Testament scriptures concerning Jesus Christ and proposes a corrected or revised revelation of Jesus (as, for example, the Book of Mormon and Mormon teaching do);
- that discounts or discredits as untrue all or portions of the New Testament record concerning Jesus;
- 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 is essentially and significantly different from the historic Jesus of Nazareth;
- that misrepresents Jesus' mission in terms compatible with pantheism or as 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

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 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).

Scripture

Matthew 1:21; Romans 3:25; 1 Corinthians 1:23-25; 2:2; 15:3; 2 Corinthians 5:19, 21; Galatians 3:13; 6:14; Ephesians 1:19-23; Hebrews 9:11-12; 1 Peter 3:18; 1 John 2:2

Confessions

Scots Confession 3.09
Heidelberg Catechism 4.031, 4.037
Confession of 1967 9.09

What Is Not Affirmed

Any theology—

- that does not affirm as biblical and true the death 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 some other basis 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 nonreligion.

SALVATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

Salvation is God’s gracious work through Jesus Christ to reclaim humankind and all creation from sin and its consequences. Salvation is a gift of God’s grace received by faith. 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 (Mark 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)

Scripture

Mark 10:45; John 3:16; Acts 4:12; Romans 3:22-26; 5:1; Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8-9

Confessions

Second Helvetic Confession 5.107-109, 5.112-113

Heidelberg Catechism 4.021, 4.060

Westminster Confession of Faith 6.080

Brief Statement of Faith 10.4

What is Not Affirmed

Any doctrine—

- that asserts that salvation can be obtained through other religions or that other religions have equally valid solutions to the human problem, 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, that denies that human beings are lost apart from Christ, or denies 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, but not limited to, theological doctrine, mission, church order, character, and ethical behavior.

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.

Scripture

Matthew 4:4; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 3:16-17

Confessions

Second Helvetic Confession 5.001, 5.003, 5.010

Westminster Confession of Faith 6.006, 6.009

Larger Catechism 7.113-114

What is Not Affirmed

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 truth the witness of Scripture to the incarnation, birth, ministry, miracles, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ (as, for example, summarized in 1 Corinthians 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.

Orthodox reformed faith does not include 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. Or any ecclesiology or morality that attempts to subvert the headship of Jesus Christ and the authority of Scripture in the interests of an “inclusive” and overbroad institutional concern for “unity, peace, and purity.”

Jesus Christ is Lord of the church, and he rules the church through the written word of scripture, illumined by the Holy Spirit.

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 *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 be elected.

As those chosen by God, we are predestined to be conformed to the image of Jesus. Our purpose, then, is to glorify God by our redeemed and sanctified life. Our faith in Christ and our good works are evidence and confirmation that we are chosen by God to be His.

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.

Scripture

Psalm 139:16; John 15:5, 8, 16; Ephesians 1:4-7, 11-13; Ephesians 2:10; 2 Timothy 1:9

Confessions

Scots Confession 3.08

Second Helvetic Confession 5.052, 5.053, 5.059-60

What Is Not Affirmed

Any doctrine—

- That denies God’s initiative in calling persons to Himself.
- 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, 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 (Hebrew, *hesed*); and it reached a culmination and fullness in the “new covenant” (Luke 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 (Hebrews 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 hostility 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 discipled 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.

Scripture

Genesis 6:18; 9:8-17; 17:1-8; Exodus 19:3-6; 2 Samuel 7:12-16; Isaiah 9:6-7; Jeremiah 23:5-6; 31:31-34
Luke 22:20; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:12-13; Hebrews 9:15; 1 Peter 2:9-10

Confessions

Scots Confession 3.16
Second Helvetic Confession 5.125-5.126
Confession of 1967 9.31

What Is Not Affirmed

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.

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. Baptism publicly acknowledges that the one baptized is part of the covenant community of faith. Baptizing infants reminds us that God reaches out to us even before we are able to respond in faith.

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. Celebrating the Lord's Supper, we give thanks as we remember that Christ lived for us, Christ died for us and Christ will come again.

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.

Scripture

Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 2: 38-39,42; 16:31-33; Romans 6:3-4; 1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:23-26; 12:13

Confessions

Heidelberg Catechism 4.066, 4.069-4.071, 4.074, 4.075-4.079
Second Helvetic Confession 5.169, 5.175, 5.205
Shorter Catechism 7.094, 7.096
Confession of 1967 9.51, 9.52
Brief Statement of Faith 10.4

What Is Not Affirmed

- 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 other sacraments can be instituted as the church deems suitable such as milk and honey, etc.
- That these sacraments are mere symbols or 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 whether or not they are received in faith.

SANCTIFICATION AND THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in the individual and collective life of believers affects real transformation—a life of increasing holiness, righteousness, power, and love, as we are changed more and more into the image of Christ. Though Christians are marred by sin and imperfect until Christ returns, there is a substantial manifestation of the righteousness and power of the kingdom of God in the believer, the church, and the world through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit connects us to the life of Christ and releases in us the supernatural and saving power of Christ's life, death, resurrection, and glory.

Scripture

Romans 8:29; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 6:11; Galatians 5:22-25; Philippians 2:12-13; 2 Thessalonians 2:13

Confessions

Scots Confession 3.12
Westminster Confession of Faith 6.075-6.077
Shorter Catechism 7.035
Larger Catechism 7.188

What Is Not Affirmed

Any doctrine—

- That proclaims that total perfection occurs in this lifetime. (1 Corinthians 13:10-12)
- That proclaims “As though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords—areas in which we do not need justification and sanctification through Him.” (Barmen Declaration, 8.15)

PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

Every believer, as a disciple of Jesus Christ, is called to participate in his priestly ministry. A priest functions to reconcile people to God. Jesus Christ is the eternal high priest of God's new covenant, who offered himself as an atoning sin offering on our behalf and who is our eternal advocate before the throne of God. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” All believers are called as disciples to do this ministry of Jesus—to participate in his priestly work of reconciling the world to

God by proclaiming the gospel, doing the works of Jesus, and manifesting the reality and power of the kingdom of God in the world. This ministry is not reserved exclusively for ordained clergy and officers, but is the vocational privilege and responsibility of every Christian.

Scripture

Exodus 19:6

Matthew 10:1, 6-7; 28:18-19; 1 Corinthians 12:7, 14, 27; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20, 1 Peter 2:9;

Revelation 1:5-6

Confessions

Second Helvetic Confession 5.153

Confession of 1967 9.31, 9.38

MISSION OF THE CHURCH

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, 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.

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 be the provisional demonstration of the new reality God intends for humanity;**
- **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 make disciples of all nations;**
- **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 participate in God's activity in the world through its life for others.**

The church is to commit itself fully to this mission, waiting for and hastening the Lord's coming again.

Scripture

Matthew 9:36-38, 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; Romans 10:13-15; 2 Peter 3:10-13

Confessions

Westminster Confession of Faith 6.058

Confession of 1967 9.06, 9.43, 9.44-9.46.

What Is Not Affirmed

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.

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.

Scripture

Psalm 24:1

Romans 12:1; 1 Corinthians 4:7; Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 4:8-11

Confessions

Larger Catechism 7.251

Confession of 1967 9.46

Brief Statement of Faith 10.33, 10.38

SECTION 3

Questions for Examination

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 tenets 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 tenets 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?

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 “teaching elder,” 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?

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?

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?

What do you understand the biblical account to mean in this description of human beings as created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27)

What does it mean to you that human beings are created male and female Genesis 1:27? What does it mean to you when Adam exclaims, after the creation of Eve, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh"? (Genesis 2.23) What is the place of sexuality in your understanding of God's good creation?

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 (1 Cor 15:3); he who knew no sin became sin on our behalf (2 Cor 5:21); he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 Jn 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 (1 Pet 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 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, 1 John 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?

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?

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?

1. What is the Reformed belief regarding the sovereignty of God?
2. 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?

3. How does the problem of evil relate to the doctrine of the Sovereignty of God?
4. How do you experience God's sovereignty in your life?

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?

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?

Mission

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 enlightened 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?

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? How 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?

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?

Our God is a relational God. Tell us how your relationship with God has affected, guided and disciplined your relationships with family, friends and significant others.

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

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

2. What does the term “priesthood of all believers” mean to you?

3. Scripturally, where does the Reformed tradition get the idea of a “priesthood of all believers”?

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

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Theological Challenges

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