

Essential Tenets and Reformed Distinctives

(Affirmed by the Session April 25, 2006)

This document is presented as a result of the theological challenges facing the PCUSA today. It is intended to define in a clear way where we stand as a congregation within this larger body with its present Book of Order and Book of Confessions.

The Session of the Church provides the following summary for teaching our congregation, as a reference for training our church officers and for communicating our expectations to prospective ministers on what we sincerely believe and proclaim.

This guide has been compiled from a broader set of information developed and endorsed by the San Diego Presbytery in 2003 (entitled “Essential Tenets and Reformed Distinctives”) has been reprinted (and modified) by permission of the publication *Theology Matters*.

What are the Essential Tenets?

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? (*Book of Order*, G-14.0405b(3))

This question is one of our ordination vows. Every ordained Presbyterian – deacon, elder, minister – must respond *yes*, which means that they choose to respect, know, “sincerely receive and adopt” certain truths or doctrines which our constitution calls “tenets.”

What are the essential tenets?

Foundational Convictions

The essential tenets are our foundational convictions, contained in our creeds and confessions, that bear witness to God’s grace in Jesus Christ. “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.” (G-2.0100(b))

The First Presbyterian Church of Moorestown, NJ adopts this summary of the essential tenets of the Christian faith and of our Reformed distinctives for use in our church. It distills the 300 pages of the *Book of Confessions* to a helpful summary – six *essentials* and seven *distinctives*.

As nominating committees consider candidates for church office, as elders examine newly-elected elders and deacons, 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. We commend this summary as a tool for teaching, training and evaluation.

A Confessional Heritage

Reformed Christians have never been at a loss to explain what they believe. We *love* explaining our faith. It is a distinguishing mark of our heritage. John Calvin’s *Institutes*, the most

influential and seminal work of Reformed theology, established the theological precedent with a near-exhaustive and systematic explanation of the cardinal truths of Christianity. Since Calvin, the proliferation of Reformed creeds, confessions, catechisms, and other theological works is a robust continuation of this thoughtful and devout impulse to *explain our faith* – speaking in the language and to the issues of each generation.

The Reformation began as a bold profession of Christian faith based on “the plain Word of God.” It was also a fearless “protestation,” explicitly rejecting and disavowing what institutional Christianity had become – a religion of human accretions and accommodations. This is why for centuries Reformation Christians were called *Protestants*.

If men ... pretend to forge for us new articles of faith, or make decisions contrary to the Word of God, then we must utterly deny them as the doctrines of devils, drawing our souls from the voice of the one God to follow the doctrines and teachings of men. (Scots Confession, 3.20)

Explanation is Proclamation

This then is no idle or esoteric exercise. The spiritual blessings flow broad and deep:

- To explain is to proclaim. The gospel – which is “the power of God for salvation” (*Rom 1:16*) – is released into the church and into the world;
- Our faith is clarified and strengthened;
- We prove ourselves faithful stewards of the “sound teaching ... guarding with the help of the Holy Spirit what was entrusted to us” by the prophets and apostles (*2Tim 1:13-14*);
- We fulfill one of the great ends of the church – “the preservation of the truth” (*G-1.0200*) and we “identify the church as a community of people known by its convictions” (*G-2.0100b*);
- We obey Jesus’ command to “love the Lord our God with ... all our mind” (*Matt 22:37*); and
- The revealed truth of God is articulated and distinguished from the ideologies and errors of the world.

We explain our faith with humility and with a profound reverence for its mysteries, while at the same time we boldly declare what the Word of God has plainly revealed to us as truth.

How will this Summary be Used?

- As a tool for instructing our congregation in the foundational truths of our faith.
- As a reference for training our prospective church officers as they prepare to take vows and enter office.
- As guidelines for communicating to prospective ministers our theological expectations concerning what Reformed ministers must sincerely believe and proclaim.

Why this Summary is Needed

First, because “theology matters” – to quote the most memorable phrase from a recent General Assembly. What we believe – the content of our faith – *matters*. If it matters, we should be able to articulate it and to explain how this truth stands against the competing truths of the world.

Second, because there is considerable confusion in our denomination. We are in the midst of a theological crisis – the result, in large measure, of a long neglect of our foundational truths. Our church is ordaining people who do not know or believe the essential tenets expressed in our confessions – such as the doctrine of the Trinity, a Nicene Christology, the doctrine of Atonement, or the conviction that people need salvation in Jesus Christ. In addition, PNCs are nominating pastors who cannot articulate a basic theology that reflects a knowledge of or appreciation for our confessions or the Bible.

Scenarios

Consider the following scenarios:

- A PNC is interviewing a candidate for the position of pastor. She is very appealing on paper and in person. She *feels* right for their church. Nobody bothers to ask questions about her theology. They assume – if she got this far, she must be a certified Presbyterian; her theology must be OK. Besides, the committee is composed entirely of lay people, none of whom feels competent to evaluate an ordained pastor on her theology. Only one of the committee members actually admits to having read the *Book of Confessions*, but he could not tell you what the Reformed “essentials” are. Imagine how empowering it would be if the PNC had such a list – *guidelines* they could use to ask questions that would help them discern and evaluate their next pastor’s theological convictions.
- A week before a newly elected elder is to be installed at your church, she comes to the pastor and says, “I see that I must take a vow that I ‘receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith.’ Pastor, I know what you preach and teach – and I mainly agree with it,” she says, “but I don’t know what *Presbyterian* means. To be able to take this vow with integrity, I need to know what the essentials are. You gave me this 300 page *Book of Confessions* – and a lot of it is really good stuff – but not all of it seems equally important, and some of it we obviously don’t believe anymore. Can you tell me which of these tenets are essential?”

These scenarios, disturbing and recurring, are the real background of this document. This summary is intended to provide guidelines that should equip our presbytery to resolve these problems with confidence and consensus.

Do Presbyterians really know what they believe? Yes. Is our theology so infinitely inclusive that *any* theological expression, if it is sincerely held is permissible? No. Are there theological and confessional standards that can be appealed to, which would reveal whether a person is inside or outside the boundaries of our basic Reformed convictions? Of course. Is the language of our tenets so elastic that every candidate for ordination will be able to receive and adopt them? Not necessarily.

“Terms of Admission”

Our historic principles of church government – in the opening chapter of the *Book of Order*—explicitly state: “Every Christian church, or association of particular, is entitled to declare the terms of admission into its communion, and the qualifications of its ministers and members.” (G-1.030(2)). That is exactly what this summary is – a good-faith attempt to declare the *theological* terms of admission into our communion. Being a Reformed minister or elder or deacon *means something*. And we owe it, in integrity, to our members to be able to declare what it means.

John Calvin’s own treatment of the essential tenets – in a treatise entitled *On the Necessity of Reforming the Church* (1543)—provides a helpful framework for organizing this summary. Calvin differentiated between those things in the Christian religion that pertain to its very soul and those things that are secondary. For him, the essence of the Christian religion consists in (1) the due worship of God and (2) and “the source from which salvation is to be obtained.” Among secondary matters he included the sacraments and church government.

Following Calvin’s lead, we list as essentials the doctrines of Scripture, God (Trinity, Creation, Sovereignty), Sin, Christology, and Atonement – the most catholic elements of our theology. Among our Reformed distinctives, which distinguish us from other major Christian traditions, we include Election and Sacraments among others.

If you glance at the table of contents, you will recognize a list of the “Big Truths” that emerge from our tradition’s interpretation of the Bible. These are truths that are prominent in our confessions and are expressed clearly and robustly not in a single confession, but in many of them. There is nothing new about this theology. This is a summary of what our confessions say we have always believed, without a great deal of elaboration.

What this Summary is Not

This summary is *not* a subscription document; no one may be required to subscribe. Nor is it a strict formulation; we are delighted when core convictions are expressed in fresh and revitalizing language. This document has no authority in itself to qualify or disqualify a candidate; it provides a tool which may be used in theological assessment.

Guidelines are not a guillotine. Our tradition has always respected a candidate’s right to declare scruples – to identify areas in which she or he can express biblical dissent with points of doctrine. Accordingly, Presbytery and its delegated committees have the authority and responsibility to discern and assess whether this professed dissent is a “serious departure” from the confessional standards or within the acknowledged freedom and latitude of our theology.

While we believe this summary of essentials and distinctives will prove helpful in training, educating, and guiding, it may prove a blunt and inappropriate instrument in specific pastoral situations which require sensitivity and compassion. In this context, the example of Jesus should

always be followed, who never compromised God's truth, but was always a "friend of sinners" and unfailingly inclusive in showing love and mercy.

Membership vs. Leadership

The constitution of the PC (U.S.A.) distinguishes between the criteria for membership in its churches and the standards for its leaders. The only essential requirement for membership is a profession of faith -- "all persons who respond in trust and obedience to God's grace in Jesus Christ and desire to become a part of the membership and ministry of His Church." (G-5.0103)

The standards for church leaders, on the other hand, are understandably stricter:

- "Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in *conformity to the historic confessional standards* of the church." (G-6.0106b) [italics added]
- "It is necessary to the integrity and health of the church that the persons who serve in it as officers *shall adhere to the essentials of the Reformed faith* and polity as expressed in *The Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government." (G-6.0108a) [italics added]

Theological boundaries and Liberty of Conscience

In pressing for a 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]

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:

In becoming a candidate or officer 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 hold office in that body. 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 governing body in which he or she serves. (G-6.0108b)

In this paragraph 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 we are in office, we are 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 officer's confessional integrity is ultimately the Session's responsibility.

Choosing to be Presbyterian

We are not called to challenge anyone's sincerity as a Christian or to dispute their right to believe what they choose. But when a person *chooses* to be an *ordained Presbyterian*, they must in good faith and with a clear conscience receive and adopt our confessional identity. We do not have the right to pick and choose the foundational truths we will believe in, with the expectation that other foundational truths can be ignored or will soon be changed. That is bad faith.

There may be ordained Presbyterians who, in their education and personal development, realize that their true convictions never were or are no longer Presbyterian. This is an issue of confessional integrity that they must wrestle with and resolve. Will we be led and guided by our confessions – even though our personal conviction changes? “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of our God stands forever.” (*Isaiah 40:8*)

Some may complain that this document is too focused on doctrine. That's because this is a document about what Presbyterians *essentially believe*. Yes, the Christian faith is about much more than 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. Choosing to be Presbyterian means understanding and embracing Presbyterian doctrine.

Therefore, it is entirely appropriate and even necessary 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 – *6 essentials* and *7 distinctives* – is our thoughtful and intentional effort to fulfill that responsibility.

Section 1: Essential Tenets

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 historical fact 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, illuminated by the Holy Spirit.

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 of 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.

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, 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 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; 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 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 or as myth 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 sins of the world." (John 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 non-religion and apart from hearing the gospel and believing in Christ.

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 slaver (*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.

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 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 to 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; 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 (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 (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 had 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.
- That defines marriage as a relationship other than that between a man and a woman.

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 10¹⁶; 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 effects real transformation – a life of increasing holiness, righteous 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: Basic Expectations of Candidates and Nominees

We believe a list of essential tenets and Reformed distinctives *includes* these articles or doctrines, based on the Scriptures and confessions shown here. We urge nominees to review these expectations for your self-examination as you consider serving.

These expectations then become the way the congregation fulfills the responsibility to discern a candidate's suitability to serve a church in the reformed tradition.

As you examine these expectations, consider if there are areas where you take exception to the doctrines and tenets described herein. 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?

We expect that as you examine this list of tenets and distinctives you say of them that you sincerely receive and adopt them as expressing essential tenets of the Reformed faith and also your faith.

Regarding 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.” Ask yourself if 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?

Could you explain the authority of Scripture in your own words?

What does the Bible say about its own authority?

As a prospective officer in the church, we expect that you have a sufficiently comprehensive understanding of the Bible's content. This would presuppose that you have a knowledge of the history of God's action among His people Israel as recorded in the Old Testament as well as the record of the Gospel stories. Have read the Bible closely in its entirety? What disciplines and habits of Bible reading and study do you observe? What experiences have you had in Bible study, leading a Bible study, or teaching the Bible? (*Reference Book of Order G-6.0304, "They should cultivate their ability to teach the Bible."*)

Other knowledge of Scripture should include such things as:

- ✓ Being able to locate the following:
 - The 10 commandments
 - The Shepherd's Psalm
 - The Lord's Prayer
 - The "fruit of the Spirit"
 - The "armor of god"
 - The gallery of Old Testament heroes of the faith
- ✓ **Discussing parables and other teachings of Jesus**
- ✓ **Describing Christian living as taught in the Epistles**
- ✓ **Relating the New Testament to the Old Testament**

Regarding the doctrine of the Trinity:

We expect:

- That you would consider the doctrine of the Trinity an essential tenet of theological integrity
- The Scots Confession, the Nicene Creed, the Westminster Confession and the Brief Statement of Faith are still valid today in expressing the theology of the Trinitarian Christian
- The Trinity is validly described as Father, Son and Holy Spirit
- That you recognize that this doctrine of the revelation of God is an essential difference between Christianity and other major religions

Regarding the sinfulness of man and God's salvation by Grace:

Reformed theology describes the human situation as requiring a savior for salvation.

We expect:

- You to be able to describe God's plan of salvation
- You to be able to explain the doctrine of justification by faith
- You to be able to define words such as:
 - Faith
 - Grace
 - Righteousness
 - Christ

- Salvation
- Atonement
- You to be able to describe the work of the Cross

Regarding the nature of Christ:

The early creeds as well as all the reformed confessions describe Jesus Christ as the unique incarnation of God's eternal Son and "very God from very God."

We expect:

- That you be able to defend the phrase "fully God and fully human" as an essential issue of faith in the Reformed tradition.

Regarding the Sovereignty of God:

Consider how you regard the sovereignty of God in your life; the Church; the world.

Regarding Community:

The New Testament implies that we are one body living in covenant not only with our Lord but with one another. In our life together, it is expected that you:

- Could explain the meaning and purpose of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper
- Practice the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers as we serve one another
- Participate and support the teaching ministry of the church
- Understand that this congregation accepts the commission of Jesus to "go and make disciples of all nations" (*Matthew 28:18-19*) as an essential part of the acting out of our faith.
- You would participate in some way in the mission programs of the church.