

Theology Matters

A Publication of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry

Vol 11 No 4 • Sep/Oct 2005

Guided by our Confessions?

By Dr. Randall Otto

This issue is devoted to a study of the key tenets of the Reformed confessions for the purpose of training officers of the church. There are eleven sections, making it ideal for an ongoing study at the beginning of monthly session or deacon meetings. Alternatively, the entire study could be done in the course of a longer workshop on training officers. It is suggested that each officer or officer-elect receive and read the materials in advance so that key ideas can be developed from the sections covered and time be available for the discussion questions.

Each year at the ordination and installation of elders and deacons, several questions from the *Book of Order* (G-14.0207) are placed before those who are to hold these offices, two of which require assent to *The Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

- 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?
- Will you fulfill your office in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?

Elders and deacons routinely affirm these vows, which must also be affirmed by Ministers of the Word and Sacrament. Such affirmations are expected and well-intentioned, but how well informed are they? The extent to which officers of the church, as well as Ministers of the Word and Sacrament, are sufficiently acquainted with the confessions to be able to affirm these vows *intelligibly*, is unclear, but ominous. Jack Rogers reports that at the

reuniting General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1983, a Task Force on the Confessional Nature of the Church held open hearings in which the following questions and comments were made:¹

- A former Moderator of the General Assembly asked, “How can candidates for ordination receive the essential tenets [beliefs] of the Reformed faith before they know what those tenets are?”
- A denominational executive lamented, “We need to point to the distressing reality that there is biblical amnesia.”
- A seminary professor observed, “We have a great illiteracy regarding our confessional tradition.”
- A pastor pleaded, “We have all but lost our confessional identity. What does it mean to be a Reformed Christian?”
- A layperson declared, “The average church member wants to know the difference between Christian and non-Christian, and what the distinctives of the Presbyterian denomination are.”

There is clearly a need to assist those in the ordination process, pastors, elders, and deacons, in understanding our confessional foundations. This study will provide pastors, elders, and deacons with an aid for studying the confessions individually or in groups as they prepare to affirm their vows so that they may be more knowledgeable about what the confessions teach and so be truly guided by them.

Rev. Randall Otto (Ph.D., Historical and Theological Studies, Westminster Theological Seminary) is pastor of West Grove Presbyterian Church, West Grove, PA. He also teaches courses in religion and philosophy for the University of Phoenix.

Introduction: The Need for Guidance in Studying the Confessions

Curiously, it does not appear that there have been any studies of how well versed office holders are in the confessions. Personal experience and anecdotal evidence, however, suggest an alarming lack of acquaintance with *The Book of Confessions*. Clifton Kirkpatrick concludes his study of our confessional foundations by saying, “The biggest problem with our *Book of Confessions* is that it is so little known and studied in the PCUSA.”² Jack Rogers has called for “an end to the pious hypocrisy into which we force many, if not most, of the office-bearers in our church”:

It is surely difficult to receive and adopt essential tenets if no one has told you what they are. It is even more difficult to be instructed and led by the confessions if you have never studied them. It would probably be chilling to discover how few office-bearers of the church have ever been asked to take that vow seriously. This is not to criticize the lay leaders. Quite the opposite; they can hardly be held accountable for something their pastors have not taught them.³

The extent to which pastors themselves are familiar with the confessions is equally unclear. Concern seems justified, however, in light of the admitted confessional ignorance of the early Karl Barth, the twentieth century’s greatest Reformed thinker. When called upon as Professor of Theology at Göttingen in 1921 to teach “Introduction to the Reformed Confessions,” Barth would later admit, “at that time I didn’t even have a copy of the Reformed confessions, and I certainly hadn’t read them.”⁴

What can it mean for the church when its professors, pastors, elders, and deacons are insufficiently rooted in the faith of the church? How can those lead the church who do not know the church’s historic teaching? Does this not get to the heart of the present confusion regarding identity and purpose within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)? Is this not why the apostle warned God’s people against being “tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching” (Eph. 4:14)? Will the church not drift aimlessly without the anchor of our common confessional foundation? How can the church lead when it is unsure of its theological heritage and identity.

“The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) states its faith and bears witness to God’s grace in Jesus Christ in the creeds and confessions in *The Book of Confessions*. In these confessional statements the church declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes, what it resolves to do” (G-2.0100). What it means to be *Christian* is defined by the universal *creeds* of the Church, the two most basic of which, the Nicene and the Apostles’ Creeds, are found in our *Book of*

Confessions. A *creed*, from the Latin *credo*, “I believe,” delineates what is generally believed by everyone who is to be called *Christian*.⁵ A *confession* delineates that universal Christian faith more specifically, based on how each denomination understands the faith of the Church. What it means to be *Reformed* and *Presbyterian*, therefore, is defined by the confessions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Finally, a *catechism* is a manual utilizing a question-and-answer format for the purpose of instructing others in that confessional faith. Our *Book of Confessions*, then, is actually comprised of the two most fundamental and universally-known *creeds* (the fourth century Nicene Creed and eighth century Apostles’ Creed), six *confessions* (the 1560 Scots, the 1561 Second Helvetic, the 1647 Westminster, the 1934 Theological Declaration of Barmen, the Confession of 1967, and the 1983 Brief Statement of Faith), and three *catechisms* (the 1563 Heidelberg, the 1647 Westminster Shorter and Larger).

The Westminster standards came to the American colonies with the Puritans in the early seventeenth century. In 1729 they were adopted as the confessional position of the newly organized Presbyterian synod in the colonies. For most of the history of Presbyterianism in the U.S., then, the Westminster Confession of Faith has served as the sole confessional standard. Pastors and officers of the church were asked if they subscribed to the “system of doctrine” contained in “the confession of our church,” i.e., the Westminster Confession. However, the simplicity and general uniformity inherent in a single confession gave way to plurality in 1967, when the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. approved a book of confessions.⁶ While some lamented this step, seeing it as relinquishing a single, self-consistent rule of faith for a larger body of diverse documents, the introduction of a book of confessions may enlarge our appreciation for the unity within diversity of Reformed theology, a unity that needs to be restored at the present. While it is clear that each of the confessional statements subsequently taken up into *The Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1983 is historically conditioned, what stands out is the unity of faith found across these statements.

There are ten affirmations listed in the second chapter of the *Book of Order*, “The Church And Its Confessions.” Clifton Kirkpatrick notes, “Chapter Two of the *Form of Government* was drafted at the reunion [1983] to be an aid to our governing bodies in examining candidates concerning the essential tenets of the Reformed faith.”⁷

The first two documents in our *Book of Confessions*, the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, attest to the place of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) within the Church catholic, or universal.

In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) gives witness to the faith of the Church catholic. The confessions express the faith of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church in the recognition of canonical Scriptures and the formulation and adoption of the

ecumenical creeds, notably the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds with their definitions of the mystery of the triune God and of the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ (G-2.0300).

The first three of the ten affirmations of the Reformed faith are those of the Christian church universal, "the recognition of the canonical Scriptures" and the creedal formulations, particularly focusing on "the mystery of the triune God" and "the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ."⁸

The Protestant Reformation occurred as a result of the humanist *ad fontes* movement calling for a return to and study of "the sources." The Reformers recognized the only valid source of truth from and about God was Holy Scripture; they thus insisted on *sola scriptura*, Scripture alone as the only rule for faith and practice. In addition, they recognized that Scripture makes it absolutely clear that Christ has done all that is necessary for the redemption of his people and that salvation is a free gift of God's grace to be received by faith alone. Hence, the additional Protestant "watchwords," *sola Christus, sola gratia, sola fides*.

In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) identifies with the affirmations of the Protestant Reformation. The focus of these affirmations is the rediscovery of God's grace in Jesus Christ as revealed in the Scriptures. The Protestant watchwords—grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone—embody principles of understanding which continue to guide and motivate the people of God in the life of faith (G-2.0400).

The fourth and fifth of the affirmations of the Reformed faith, then, are salvation by God's grace and salvation received by faith, more commonly known as the Reformation maxim of justification by grace through faith. Again, it should be noted, the authority of Scripture is emphasized.

Finally, several key themes distinguish various portions of the Church arising out of the Reformation. In particular, Reformed theology and church life are distinguished by an emphasis on the sovereignty of God, God's election of a people for himself, the centrality of the covenant, worship and life that seeks God's glory in all things and that acknowledges the Lordship of Christ over all things.

In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) expresses the faith of the Reformed tradition. Central to this tradition is the affirmation of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love. Related to this central affirmation of God's sovereignty are other great themes of the Reformed tradition:

- (1) The election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation;
- (2) Covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God;

- (3) A faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God's creation;
- (4) The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God (G. 0500a).

The sixth through tenth of the affirmations of the Reformed faith, then, accent God's sovereignty, grace, and glory as the beginning and end of all human endeavors.

Chapter two of the Form of Government of the *Book of Order* concludes its discussion on the church and its confessions by pointing to their function: "The creeds and confessions of this church reflect a particular stance within the history of God's people. They are the result of prayer, thought, and experience within a living tradition. They serve to strengthen personal commitment and the life and witness of the community of believers" (G-2.0500b). The statements within our *Book of Confessions*, then, express who we are as Presbyterians, what we believe, and how we will act. The confessional statements stand under the authority of Scripture, but if they are faithful expositions of the teaching of Scripture, they are "more than 'good advice'." Indeed, "It is essential for the health of the church and the integrity of her leadership that officers be students of the confessions."⁹ They embody the work and witness of the Holy Spirit to our ancestors in the faith, a "tradition" of knowing God, of understanding and acting upon his will as revealed in Scripture. *Tradition* comes from the Latin *tradere*, meaning "to hand over to a person's care, protection, management, to entrust to a person for instruction." Paul urged his readers, "stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter" (2 Thess. 2:15); on the other hand, they were to "keep away from believers who are living...not according to the tradition that they received from us" (2 Thess. 3:6).¹⁰ Again, Paul instructed Timothy, "hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us" (2 Tim. 1:13-14). Paul urged Timothy and the church to pay close attention to the sacred deposit that had been given them, the tradition they had received, for it was the standard of sound teaching by which they were to measure genuine faith and practice. The extent to which our confessional documents summarize the apostolic tradition is the extent to which they must be studied, guarded, and passed on in the continuing witness and work of the Holy Spirit in our day.

The circumstances of each of the statements of faith are aptly summarized in a page or two preceding each in *The Book of Confessions*; hence, there will be no effort made to do that here. Instead, we proceed now to elucidating the ten affirmations of the Reformed faith as found in *The Book of Confessions*.

1. The Recognition of the Canonical Scriptures

Among the vows taken by church officers, the two which pertain to the confessions are preceded by the first two vows, beginning with personal trust in Jesus Christ as Savior, Lord and Head of the Church, through whom we have access to the triune God, followed by acceptance of “the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word to you” (G-14.0207b). The authority of the Bible has thus already been affirmed by those being ordained and/or installed as church officers when they are next asked about the essential tenets as expressed in the confessions. Both of the “confessional vows” build on these opening two vows, namely the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the centrality of Scripture:

- 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?
- will you fulfill your office *in obedience to Jesus Christ under the authority of Scripture*, and be continually guided by our confessions?

In affirming these vows, church officers acknowledge that the statements of faith in our *Book of Confessions* are, in these essential matters, authentic and reliable, i.e., genuine, true, faithful, trustworthy, and authoritative. Chapter two of the *Book of Order* accents the supreme authority of Christ and of Scripture (G-2.0200), drawing on the Preface to the Confession of 1967 (*Book of Confessions* [henceforth BC] 9.03):

These confessional statements are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him. While confessional standards are subordinate to the Scriptures, they are, nonetheless, standards. They are not lightly drawn up or subscribed to, nor may they be ignored or dismissed.

In the “Preliminary Principles” of the *Book of Order*, we read: “Insofar as Christ’s will for the Church is set forth in Scripture, it is to be obeyed” (G-1.0100c). The Scriptures, then, authoritatively attest to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The confessions authoritatively and reliably set forth the essential tenets of the Reformed understanding of the Scriptures and the will of God in Jesus Christ. Consequently, what the confessions say on these matters “is to be obeyed.”

What do the confessions teach regarding the Scriptures? “We believe and confess the Scriptures of God sufficient to instruct and make perfect the man of God, so do we affirm and avow their authority to be from God, and not to depend on men or angels” (Scots Conf., BC 3.19). In

concurrence, “we believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men. For God himself spoke to the fathers, prophets, apostles, and still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures” (Second Helvetic Conf., BC 5.001). In speaking of the Scriptures’ “sufficient authority of themselves,” the confessions are saying that biblical authority does not derive from the Church or from those who wrote the books of the Bible, some of whom are known, many of whom are not. Rather, as the Westminster Confession so succinctly puts it, “the authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God” (BC 6.004).

How is Scripture “the Word of God?” The Westminster Confession says we may be moved by the testimony of the Church, the majesty of the style, scope, and unity of Scripture, the way it shows us “the only way of man’s salvation,” and “the many other incomparable excellencies” by which it shows itself to be the Word of God; “yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts” (BC 6.005). In other words, the same Spirit who inspired the writing of the Scriptures bears witness to them “by and with the Word in our hearts,” assuring us that it is the Word of God. The Larger Catechism (BC 7.114), written as an aid for preaching through the Westminster Confession, answers the question, “How doth it appear that the Scriptures are the Word of God?”, by speaking of this “inner testimony of the Holy Spirit”:

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

The means by which all sixty-six books of the Bible came into the canon of Scripture stands beyond the scope of this study and is not addressed in any of the confessions.¹¹ The Westminster Confession simply states of the books of the canon, “All which are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life” (BC 6.002). *Canon* means “norm” or “standard,” coming from the Greek word for a measuring rod. The biblical canon is the norm by which we measure “all that pertains to a saving faith, and also to the framing of a life acceptable to God; and in this respect it is expressly commanded by God that nothing be either added to or taken from the same” (Second Helvetic Conf., BC 5.002). Scripture is *the* certain authority for the church and is *the only rule* for faith and practice. “The

whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequences may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time may be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men" (Westminster Conf., BC 6.006). The "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27), then, is to be considered in determining how we are to know, love, and serve God in the church of Jesus Christ.

Questions for discussion:

1. "The character, qualifications, and authority of Church officers are laid down in the Holy Scriptures" (G-1.0306). Do you know where to find them? See, especially, 1 Tim. 3:1-13 and Titus 1:6-9. Do you see yourself as part of that "great tradition" of church leaders going back to those with whom Moses surrounded himself in Exod. 18:13-26? How might it change your view of your role in the church if you saw yourself that way?

2. If "early Reformed confessions usually began with a formal article on Holy Scripture,"¹³ how should questions before church officers begin? What does it mean and how does one "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5)? How much of our meetings are based on "I feel" rather than "Scripture says"?

3. "The church affirms 'Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda,' that is, 'The church reformed, always reforming according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit' (G-2.0200). Can "the Word of God and the call of the Spirit" be distinguished or set in opposition? Is "the call of the Spirit" not found in "the Word of God"?

4. The Second Helvetic Confession says that the *preaching* of the Word of God *is* the Word of God: "when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful" (BC 5.004). How is the Word preached the Word of God? What does that mean for our attention to preaching, both in preparation, proclamation, and listening?

2. The Mystery of the Triune God

In response to the question, "What do the Scriptures principally teach?", the Shorter Catechism says, "The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man." What, then, do the Scriptures teach concerning God? First and foremost, "There is but one only living and true God" (Westminster Conf., BC 6.011). In accord with the *Shema* of Israel (Deut. 6:4), the Church declares its belief in the one God of Israel and, in so doing, repudiates any and all other gods. Religious belief in other gods is seen throughout the Old Testament as well as the New, yet God declares that it is he, YHWH, the God who entered into covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and with Moses

to deliver a people unto himself out of Egypt, who alone is to be worshiped (Exod. 20:1-3). This is the God "in whom alone we must cleave, whom alone we must serve, whom only we must worship, and in whom alone we put our trust" (Scots Conf., BC 3.01). There is, in truth, no other god, for "there is but one only, the living and true God" (Shorter Catechism, BC 7.005).

The Scriptures further teach that the living and true God "is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth" (Shorter Catechism, BC 7.004). In so speaking of God, the catechism employs a standard theological distinction, that of the "incommunicable attributes" and "communicable attributes" of God, i.e., what God does not share with anything else because it is unique to his being, and what he shares with human beings as those made in his image, respectively.

God is unique in many ways, a summation of which is given in the Shorter Catechism. God "is a Spirit." In so speaking, the confession intends us to understand that God "does not possess bodily parts or passions; that he is composed of no material elements; that he is not subject to any of the limiting conditions of material existence; and, consequently, that he is not to be apprehended as the object of any of our bodily senses."¹³ This contradicts notions of God as having an actual body (found in Mormonism, e.g.) and helps us to recognize that such talk of God as having eyes, ears, a strong right arm, etc., are ways of speaking that help us relate to God (anthropomorphisms, from the Greek *anthropos* [human] + *morph* [shaped] = "human shaped"). God is not comprised of any material elements or limited by them, so he cannot grow old, decay, or be bounded, as those with a body are. He is *not* "the man upstairs" and human pictures of him necessarily are limited.

This is further accented in the catechism's next saying that he is "infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being." In so speaking, the catechism accents God's self-sufficiency. He did not need to create anything or share himself with anyone, for he was and ever shall be perfectly complete and fulfilled in his own triune being. That God did not need anything for his own fulfillment demonstrates the grace inherent in God's act of creation, particularly of humanity in his image.

God is "infinite," not subject to the spatial limitations of creation. God is omnipresent, everywhere always. God *is everywhere and in everything*, but everywhere and everything *is not God*, as pantheism believes (e.g. Hinduism and the New Age movement). Rather, the biblical perspective is that God *is present everywhere and in everything*, but he also *transcends everywhere and everything*; he is distinct from all that is, for he was before all and stands beyond all. Thus a tree is not God, although God is its creator.

God is also “eternal,” not subject to the limitations of time. God is a timeless being who transcends time, but he chose to enter into time and space for the salvation of his creation. Before anything was created and time was called into being, God eternally existed. With creation and the calling of space and time into existence, God both stood over all things as Lord of time and entered into all things in upholding them and acting to effect his purpose for creation. God stands above time and is able to see it all as present. He knows the beginning from the end and vice versa, because he eternally *is!*

This summation of God’s incommunicable attributes concludes with his being “unchangeable.” Because God is perfect, he cannot change. He is complete in himself and perfect in all his ways. It is because God is unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises, that we can trust him completely and know that his word is sure.

While these aspects of God are unique to his being, God also shares many aspects of himself with us: “wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” These were characteristics of God given originally to humanity for our relationships with each other and stewardship over all of creation (Gen. 1:28); however, by our fall into sin, these characteristics were twisted to selfish ends. In Christ and by the Holy Spirit we are renewed in these attributes. *Wisdom* consists of implementing the will of God in everyday life. All *power* is derivative, given by God not as an end in itself, but as a means to serving others. *Holiness* is God’s expectation that his people will be like he is, pure and righteous. *Justice* is the practical implementation of holiness, acting upon the righteous demands of the holy God for equity in personal relationships and the care especially of the poor. *Goodness* is the quality of being loving, gracious and kind that has its source in God. *Truth* is the correspondence we are to have with the reality of God’s Word and will. In each of these ways, God communicates attributes to us by the work of his Spirit to make us more like himself.

God is triune. “There are three persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory” (Shorter Catechism; BC 7:006). In other words, in the divine being (essence, substance) of God, there are three persons.

Analogies to the Trinity always falter, but some can be helpful. The triangle is particularly useful for demonstrating the oneness within the Trinity, that there are three persons in the Godhead, but one essence in which all three commune and participate. There is no point of division within the triangle to indicate where one corner becomes another. In the same way, the whole undivided essence of God belongs equally to each of the three persons of the Trinity. The divine essence is not divided up among the three persons, but is wholly in each of the three persons, so that they have a numerical unity of essence, being one God.

The Father is the eternal origin of the Godhead, with the Son eternally begotten of the Father and the Holy Spirit eternally processing from Father and Son. It must be emphasized that because this talk of origin and derivation is *eternal*, there never was a time when each of the three persons of the Godhead did not exist; all are eternally existent persons within the perfect communion of the Godhead. Moreover, while each of the persons has a particular focus in the Trinity’s relation to creation, the Father as Creator, the Son as Redeemer, the Spirit as Sanctifier (cf., e.g., 1 Pet. 1:2), each participates in the work of the others, because all are fully God.

Questions for discussion:

1. In what ways are you as a church leader to be like God? Are there any ways that are especially incumbent upon you that might not be so much the case among other church members?
2. Is there an attribute of God you particularly admire and would like to share more of?
3. Can you see ways in which humanity should mirror God as a community? How can the church most effectively bear that image?

3. The Incarnation of the Eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ

Understanding the basics of the Trinity is necessary to understanding the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, for it was not the Father who was incarnated, suffered, and died to take away human sin and its penalty, but rather the Son. How many times have earnest believers addressed the Father in prayer and subsequently thanked him for dying on the cross for their sins, unwittingly falling into an ancient heresy known as *patripassianism* (*pater* [father] + *passio* [suffer], “the Father suffers”). The Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct persons within the Triune God and it is the Son’s primary role to serve as “the only Redeemer of God’s elect” (Shorter Catechism; BC 7.021). The Westminster Confession states, “The Son of God, the second Person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance, and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man’s nature, with all the essential properties and common infirmities thereof; yet without sin” (BC 6.044). Jesus, the human name of the Son become incarnate, was thus fully God, remaining “of one substance, and equal with the Father” in the incarnation, while becoming fully human, “with all the essential properties and common infirmities thereof.” In becoming the human being *Jesus*, God the Son did not give up the essential nature of divinity. Thus, John, in saying “the Word became flesh and *lived* among us” (John 1:14), uses a coined Greek verb drawing on the word *tent* or *tabernacle*, clearly hearkening back to the Old Testament tabernacle. There, God descended in covenant with Israel to dwell among

them and be their God, veiling his glory in the pillar of cloud and fire. That old covenant tabernacle relationship was a *temporary* dwelling of God amongst his people; in Jesus Christ, however, God (the Son) and humanity have been joined in a *perpetual* union of two natures in the one person of Jesus. In the incarnation, God the Son became henceforth what he was not (i.e., human) so we might become henceforth what we are not (pure, like God). As the fourth-century church father Athanasius so aptly put it, God the Son could not redeem what he did not become; hence, if he were to redeem humanity, it was necessary that he become fully human. God the Son was forever changed by the incarnation, for he is henceforth and forever human, as well as God.

However, in becoming what he was not, in becoming a human being, the Son did not become a sinner. Indeed, “being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, of her substance,” the Son became fully human, but the human nature he received of Mary “was sanctified and anointed with the Holy Spirit above measure” (Westminster Conf.; BC 6.045). As a consequence, the human nature Jesus received of Mary was not tainted with the inherent depravity all the rest of humanity receives from Adam’s original sin. Jesus was born with a nature like Adam’s before the Fall. Jesus’ humanity was sinless in conception and remained sinless in obedience to the Father throughout his life; for this reason, Jesus was able to be the fulfillment and realization of the Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Pet. 1:19).

How God became human is indeed a mystery, but a clue may be found in Luke 1:35 where, in the annunciation of Gabriel to Mary, “the angel said, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God!’” The word translated *overshadow* here is the same word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (LXX) for God’s presence resting upon the tabernacle in the pillar of cloud and fire (Exod. 40:35). “Mary’s experience is to be compared to the dramatic way in which God’s glory and the cloud marking his presence came down upon the completed tabernacle,”¹⁴ though it must be observed that, while the pillar of cloud and fire descended in the Old Testament upon a *completed* tabernacle for a *temporary* manifestation of God, the glory of God in the Son descended in the *conception* of the human being Jesus for a *permanent* manifestation of God among humanity.¹⁵ Jesus is Emmanuel, for truly in him, “God is with us” (Matt. 1:23).

Questions for Discussion:

1. Jesus was *by nature* the Son of God, while we are *by adoption* children of God through faith in him. What does it mean to you to know that in the days of the New Testament, an adopted child had all the rights and privileges of a naturally-born son? Cf. Gal. 4:4-5.
2. What does it mean to you to know that God the Son

was forever changed by becoming a human being? Cf. Phil. 2:1-11.

3. How does having become “participants in the divine nature” affect your walk with God and leadership of his church? Cf. 2 Pet. 1:3-9.

4. Salvation by God’s Grace

There has always been but one means of salvation appointed by God, that of a vicarious substitutionary sacrifice. We have already alluded to the Passover lamb under the old covenant in which an unblemished male lamb was to be sacrificed and its blood sprinkled on the doorframes of the houses where the Passover was eaten; when God saw the blood of that spotless male lamb applied in faith, he would pass over the Israelites, sparing them from the judgment to come upon the Egyptians who held them in bondage (Exod. 12). It was a gift of God’s grace that spared the Israelites then, foreshadowing the substitutionary work of Jesus Christ on the cross for us and our redemption.

Indeed, from the fall of humanity in Adam’s original sin and humanity’s subsequent corruption in sin and estrangement from God, God has graciously provided for our reconciliation through the sacrifices foreshadowing the work of Jesus Christ. Apart from God’s provision for our deliverance in Christ, we would be without hope. “God is indeed merciful and gracious, but he is also righteous. It is his righteousness which requires that sin committed against the supreme majesty of God be punished with extreme, that is, with eternal punishment of body and soul” (Heidelberg Catechism Q 11; BC 4.011). We incur a debt to God for our failure to obey, please, and glorify him. Payment has to be made to God’s justice and righteous requirements for our offenses against him. “God wills that his righteousness be satisfied; therefore, payment in full must be made to his righteousness, either by ourselves or by another” (Heidelberg Catechism Q. 12; BC 4.012).

The debt we owe God for our violations of his Law is beyond our ability to calculate or pay. We are guilty of sinning against God for the things we do in direct violation of his Law (sins of commission), ways in which we fail to fulfill God’s commands (sins of omission), including offenses of which we were not conscious or are not even aware (unintentional sins [Lev. 4; Num. 15:24-29], hidden faults [Ps. 19:12]). These obligations of God’s Law, both positive (“What is required?”) and negative (“What is forbidden?”), are wonderfully elucidated in the pertinent sections of the Heidelberg Catechism (Questions 92-115), the Shorter Catechism (Questions 41-82), and Larger Catechism (Questions 91-152) in our *Book of Confessions*. Since “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it” (Jas. 2:10), we have, like the man in Jesus’ parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt. 18:21-35), accrued a debt we

can never pay. “Every sin, even the least, being against the sovereignty, goodness, and holiness of God, and against his righteous law, deserveth his wrath and curse, both in this life, and that which is to come; and cannot be expiated but by the blood of Christ” (Larger Catechism Q. 152; BC 7.262).

We cannot pay the debt we owe for sin, though payment must be made. “God’s righteousness requires that man who has sinned should make reparation for sin, but the man who is himself a sinner cannot pay for others,” or for himself (Heidelberg Catechism Q. 16; BC 4.016). Consequently, the only one who can pay for our sins must be both God and human: human, because we owe the debt, yet God, “so that by the power of his divinity he might bear as a man the burden of God’s wrath, and recover for us and restore to us righteousness and life” (Heidelberg Catechism Q. 17; BC 4.017). This is the good news that God has graciously offered to all in Christ from the time of humanity’s fall into sin, “the holy gospel, which God himself revealed in the beginning in the Garden of Eden, afterward proclaimed through the holy patriarchs and prophets and foreshadowed through the sacrifices and other rites of the Old Covenant, and finally fulfilled through his own well-beloved Son” (Heidelberg Catechism Q. 19; BC 4.019).

We are justified, i.e., forgiven of sin and accepted as righteous, only through the “grace of Christ,”

Now it is most certain that all of us are by nature sinners and godless, and before God’s judgment-seat are convicted of godlessness and are guilty of death, but that, solely by the grace of Christ and not from any merit of ours or consideration of us, we are justified, that is, absolved from sin and death by God the Judge (Second Helvetic Conf.; BC 5.107).

This is the “great exchange” which God offers us in the gospel. We are given, by God’s grace, the opportunity to place all our sins to Christ’s account, so that he has become responsible to pay for them, which his sacrifice of infinite value upon the cross is sufficient to accomplish.

Questions for Discussion:

1. If the only one who could save us was one both God and human, what does that mean for the possibility of salvation in other religions?
2. What does it mean to you to be “bought with a price” (1 Cor. 6:20)?
3. Do you believe that Jesus’ atoning work on the cross makes possible our salvation or actually secures it? Think of Old Testament analogies of a priest offering a sacrifice and the meaning of atonement as originally composed, “at-one-ment.”

5. Salvation Received by Faith

Salvation is a gift God offers to all who will receive it in simple faith. The Reformation emphasized that we are justified by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. In response to the question, “How are you righteous before God?” the Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 60; BC 4.060) states the main tenets of this Reformed axiom:

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

We are thus saved by the work Christ accomplished for us, which we receive by faith, apart from anything in us or anything we could do. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

What is faith? It is not, as in common parlance, a mere feeling, desperate hope, or “blind leap.” It is not mere intellectual apprehension of what the Bible says or even belief in Christ which “endures for a little while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away” (Matt. 13:21). Rather, true, saving faith is the effect of the gracious work of the Holy Spirit whereby the believer receives, rests upon, and acts upon the promises and call of God in Christ.

It is not only a certain knowledge by which I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in his Word, but also a wholehearted trust which the Holy Spirit creates in me through the gospel, that, not only to others, but to me also God has given the forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation, out of sheer grace for the sake of Christ’s saving work (Heidelberg Cat., Q. 21; BC 4.021).

There are three elements of faith: intellectual, emotional, and volitional. There is an intellectual element that is fundamental to faith. Faith believes the teachings of the Bible, particularly as they pertain to who God is, our human condition, and the way we are to come before God and live before him. Faith is founded in the Word proclaimed and has a distinctive doctrinal element to it. Many today downplay doctrine as obscure, irrelevant, and boring. *Doctrine*, however, is the *teaching* that founds and informs genuine Christian understanding and life. Paul told Timothy in words that should motivate pastors, elders, and deacons to a greater interest in theological study, “hold to the standard of sound teaching you have

heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us” (2 Tim. 1:13-14). How can church officers “hold to” and “guard” what they are unsure of? Church officers should be students of God’s Word and its doctrinal content. Those who are elected to church office are to be examined “as to their personal faith; knowledge of the doctrine, government, and discipline contained in the Constitution of the church; and the duties of the office” (G-14.0205). Knowledge of doctrine is thus important, though we often tend to shy away from doctrinal discussions for fear of embarrassing someone of limited understanding or entering into a dispute. As this journal stresses, *theology matters*.

There is certainty and assurance in the knowledge of saving faith (Heb. 11:1). Saving faith, however, is no dead orthodoxy wherein doctrinal facts are acknowledged but make no difference in life and outlook (Jas. 2:14-17). Saving faith is alive. It is evident in a *heartfelt commitment* to the person and work of Jesus Christ individually and in his church. We are called to “glorify God, and to enjoy him forever” (Shorter Catechism Q. 1; BC 7.001). Dull and lifeless worship does not evince joy in God’s presence! We should want to worship, praise, and serve God however we can; we will not grow weary in well doing, if we serve God in the joy he gives!

Finally, there is a volitional element to faith, so that our wills are changed from desiring our own gratification to desiring the Lord’s glory and pleasure. We should say, “not my will, but yours be done.” This is not always easy to do and sometimes involves a real struggle, which may well be what Paul recounts in Romans 7. However, we ought not rationalize our tendencies to sin and capitulate to them, but fight against them in the overcoming power of the risen Christ. Being a Christian means dying to ourselves, taking up our cross, and following him who loved us and gave himself for us. In response to the question, “why are you called a Christian?”, the Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 32; BC 4.032) answers, “Because through faith I share in Christ and thus in his anointing, so that I may confess his name, offer myself a living sacrifice of gratitude to him, and fight against sin and the devil with a free and good conscience throughout this life and hereafter rule with him in eternity over all creatures.” *Sacrifice* is usually associated with something dead, but God wants us to live for him. As Rick Warren aptly puts it, “the problem with a living sacrifice is that it can crawl off the altar, and we often do that.”¹⁶ That is why we need to “die daily,” to sin, self, and the ways of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

The desire to “die daily” stands in stark contrast to our natural inclinations. This is why repentance is a necessary correlate to saving faith, “the other side of the coin.” In repentance, we “turn from” the things that displease God and in faith we “turn to” Jesus for forgiveness and help for living in a way that pleases the Lord. The Westminster Confession declares, “Repentance

unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ” (BC 6.081).

What is repentance? The Shorter Catechism says, “repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience” (Q. 87; BC 7.087). Repentance is a grace granted to believers in the new birth giving them a desire to turn from a life displeasing to God to a life that is increasingly in accord with God’s will. As long as we wrestle with a sinful nature in the flesh, some aspects of our lives will be out of harmony with God’s perfect will; however, as much as we are aware of disobedience, we will fight against it. When we fall, we should confess our sins and turn from them, confident in God’s forgiveness in Christ. It cannot be a matter of justice to call good what God calls evil or sin. Instead, if it dishonors God, we must take his vantage point and turn from it, calling it what God calls it, sin, something out of accord with his will and with what is best. We will endeavor by God’s grace to live in a way pleasing to the Lord and to encourage others to do the same.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How can we learn to “enjoy God”? What hinders that joy? What incites it?
2. How important to you, your session, and your church is “sound doctrine”? What would you do if you had a question about something that had been preached or taught?
3. Why is repentance so difficult? How is repentance evidenced? Can we be in touch with God apart from a penitent heart? Cf. Ps. 66:18; Prov. 21:27; 28:9; Isa. 1:10-20.

6. The Sovereignty of God

What does it mean to say God is sovereign? According to our confessions, it entails several ideas. First, God is the creator and sustainer of all things. Because he has created all things, he has complete authority over them to do with them as he pleases. “He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom, are all things; and hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them, whatsoever himself pleaseth” (Westminster Conf.; BC 6.012).

It follows, scripturally and logically, that God has a purpose in all that occurs and ordains whatsoever comes to pass *en route* to the achievement of that purpose. Thus, the Scots Confession says God has created and sustains all things “for such end as his eternal wisdom, goodness, and justice have appointed, and to the manifestation of his

own glory” (BC 3.01). The Westminster Confession famously declares, “God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin; nor is violence offered to the will of the creature” (BC 6.014).

Our Reformed confessions declare that it is God who has chosen his people in Christ from before the foundation of the world, apart from anything foreseen in them or done by them, so that his election might stand, not on the basis of works, but on the basis of the divine decision and call. We will discuss election in the next portion of this study. However, there is inherent in that divine decision to call out a people unto himself an additional aspect of the sovereignty of God to which our confessions draw attention, namely the divine purpose to be achieved in those he calls and saves.

We are elected for a purpose, as the Second Helvetic Confession acknowledges. “The saints are chosen in Christ for a definite purpose, which the apostle himself explains when he says, ‘He chose us in him for adoption that we should be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption to be his sons through Jesus Christ that they should be to the praise of the glory of his grace’ (Eph. 1:4 ff.)” (BC 5.054). God’s sovereign purpose in saving us is that we devote ourselves to him, praise him, and thank him for the many ways in which he blesses our lives. God’s purpose in our salvation is that we reflect his goodness, grace, and glory by being holy as he is holy.

This means the sovereignty of God is to be displayed in lives that are consecrated to God’s glory, in loving and obedient submission to his will. All people should recognize God and bow before him in humble thanks, devotion, and love.

The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all; is good, and doeth good unto all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture (Westminster Conf.; BC 6.112).

Although all people should bow before the sovereign God and worship him, the reality is many do not, at least not according to the way God himself has prescribed in Scripture. However, those to whom God has revealed himself in his Word and by his Spirit, whom he has enabled to repent and believe the gospel, whom he has given the privilege of adoption as sons and daughters, these especially have a solemn duty as well as sacred privilege of worshipping God in all they do and gathering

to worship him regularly in the assembly of the faithful. Church officers, in particular, should evidence this faithfulness, joy, and sense of privilege in worship and encourage others by their active involvement in worship and service to consecrate themselves wholly to God. Church officers cannot expect the church to be other than they themselves demonstrate.

The sovereignty of God has to do with all spheres of life. Everything and everyone should fall under the Lordship of God in Jesus Christ. That includes the political and social dimensions of life, as well. As previously said, all power is derivative; hence, those who govern in the affairs of humanity should do so in the recognition that they are to represent God in justice, righteousness, and truth. “God, the Supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates to be under him over the people, for his own glory and the public good; and to this end, hath armed them with the power of the sword, for the defense and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evildoers” (Westminster Conf.; BC 6.127). Social justice must therefore concern all who take seriously the sovereignty of God. There is clearly a political dimension to the Reformed theological perspective and, while particular candidates may not be endorsed in any way by the church, the biblical mandates for a just society should be proclaimed from the pulpit and studied in classes for the sake of the One who has called us to take dominion over all things for his glory (Gen. 1:26) in what has historically been called the “cultural mandate.” Every aspect of life is to be brought under the dominion of God.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What does it mean to call Jesus “Lord”? Cf. Lk. 6:46.
2. Is there a political dimension to saying, “Jesus is Lord”? Should political issues be addressed from the pulpit or in classes? Why or why not?
3. We often hear someone say about an issue, “you can think what you want about it.” Is that true? Consider, for example, 2 Cor. 10:5.

7. God’s Election of a People for Service as well as Salvation

The grace of God is put in bold relief by the Reformed doctrine of election. Before the foundation of the world God chose a people unto himself, not based on anything foreseen in them or done by them. “From eternity God has freely, and of his mere grace, without any respect to men, predestinated or elected the saints whom he wills to save in Christ, according to the saying of the apostle, ‘God chose us in him before the foundation of the world’ (Eph. 1:4)” (Second Helvetic Conf.; BC 5.052). The

Westminster Confession emphasizes that God's election is unconditioned by anything other than God's own choice:

Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his free grace and love alone, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace (BC 6.018).

God did not choose us, then, because he foresaw we would believe in Christ or would be holy. Rather, he chose us, before we were created, before we had "been born or had done anything good or bad" "so that God's purpose of election might continue, not by works but by his call" (Rom. 9:11-12). God's choice of us in Christ is not based on who we were, are, or ever will be, but on his sovereign love, grace, and purpose.

It is further to be noticed that we, the church, are elected *in Christ*. While classical theology's conceptualization of election has been in predominantly individualistic terms, it is also possible to understand election in corporate terms.¹⁷ In the latter, while there is acknowledgment of God's call upon individuals to fulfill certain functions, election unto salvation is viewed as belonging to *the covenant community, the people of God* who worship and serve him from the heart. This is in keeping with the Old Testament portrayal of God's election of Israel and the continuity that is requisite for the New Testament conceptualization of the new Israel, the church.

This election does not have individual emphasis in Paul, any more than it did for Israel in the Old Testament or the Early Jewish period. Rather, it implies a covenant-relationship through which God chooses for Himself a whole people. This collectivism is of supreme importance for the understanding of the implications of "election in Christ."¹⁸

The first-century Mediterranean person did not see himself in Western individualistic terms, but in relational terms, as members of a group, such as a family, village, or nation. This elucidates the "numerous corporate metaphors employed to describe the church—the body of Christ, house (temple), bride, people of God, and 'in Christ.' Christians find their identity as members of this inclusive organism."¹⁹ Passages such as Eph. 1:4, then, might be interpreted better in corporate terms than individualistic: "God chose *us*," the church, "in Christ before the foundation of the world." "In God's eternal purpose the believers are contemplated as existing in Christ, as the Head, the Summary, of the race. The *eklog* [election] has no separate existence, independently of the *eklektos* [elect one] (Luke ix. 35, xxiii. 35). The election of Christ involves implicitly the election of the Church."²⁰ God gave a people to his Son before creation in the covenant of redemption, so that all those who are united

with Christ, the representative of the new race, have eternal life as a gift of God's grace. "Whereas in Judaism it was the nation, or the faithful remnant, which was the primary subject of election," in Ephesians "the elect group consists of all, both Jews and Gentiles, who in being reconciled to God have been reconciled to one another (cf 2:14-17) and who form the body of Christ. The Church is the elect."²¹ Although people are not Christians simply because they associate with the covenant community of the church, it is to be asked whether they are Christians if they do not identify with the corporate body in the sacrament of baptism, worship, and the fellowship of Christ in the sacrament of holy communion.²² Election is unto the life, community, and service of God in the church of Jesus Christ.

We esteem fellowship with the true Church of Christ so highly that we deny that those can live before God who do not stand in fellowship with the true Church of God, but separate themselves from it. For as there was no salvation outside Noah's ark, when the world perished in the flood; so we believe that there is no certain salvation outside Christ, who offers himself to be enjoyed by the elect in the Church; and hence we teach that those who wish to live ought not to be separated from the true Church of Christ (Second Helvetic Conf.; BC 5.136).

The benefits of this election are manifold, for by it those who believe in Christ are assured that God, who has chosen them for himself, will also bring them inevitably to glory.

As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, fore-ordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore they who are elected being fallen in Adam are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith by his Spirit working in due season; are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power through faith unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only (Westminster Conf.; BC 6.019).

God will lose none of those whom he has given unto Jesus his Son. There is great comfort and assurance in this doctrine to those who truly believe the gospel.

Although hypocrites, and other unregenerate men, may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions: of being in the favor of God and estate of salvation; which hope of theirs shall perish: yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may in this life be certainly assured that they are in a state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God: which hope shall never make them ashamed (Westminster Conf.; BC 6.097).

It is of no use to speculate about who may or may not be elected according to God's eternal decree. Rather, as the

Second Helvetic Confession (BC 5.059) asserts, “the preaching of the gospel is to be heard, and it is to be believed; and it is to be held as beyond doubt that if you believe and are in Christ, you are elected.” Christ, and our relationship to him, is the basis for determining our election: “Let Christ, therefore, be the looking glass, in whom we may contemplate our predestination. We shall have a sufficiently clear and sure testimony that we are inscribed in the Book of Life if we have fellowship with Christ, and he is ours and we are his in true faith” (Second Helvetic Conf.; BC 5.060). While the Westminster tradition boldly asserts the logic of election in saying, “God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin” (BC 6.020), the Second Helvetic Confession encourages us to have a “good hope for all”: “although God knows who are his, and here and there mention is made of the small number of elect, yet we must hope well of all, and not rashly judge any man to be a reprobate” (BC 5.055). Hence, no matter how unresponsive someone might seem to the gospel, we should continue to reach out to that person in the “good hope” that God may yet break through the hardness of his/her heart by the power of his Word and Spirit.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How does it make you feel to know that God loved you for “no good reason” other than he wanted to share himself with you? What impact should that make on church relations?
2. What does it mean to you to be “in Christ”? Do you think of that as a place, like being *in* Noah’s ark? What are the consequences of such an analogy for those who are not “in Christ”?
3. How can you know if you are elect?

8. Covenant Life Marked by Disciplined Concern for Order

The idea of covenant is central to Reformed thought, as is evident by the many churches named “Covenant Presbyterian.” You seldom hear of Methodist, Lutheran, or Baptist churches named “Covenant”! Indeed, Reformed thought is generally termed “covenant theology.” The idea of covenant is complex, but it revolves around an agreement. Different types of covenants were found in the ancient Near East, some unconditional and others conditional.

While there are many covenants in Scripture pertaining to a variety of matters, Reformed theology divides the fall of humanity into sin and the redemptive work of God into two basic covenants, the covenant of works and the

covenant of grace. The covenant of works has to do with the original state of humanity in Adam and our obedience to the command of God not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is called a “covenant of works” because, if humanity had fulfilled the terms of the covenant in obedience to God, humanity would have been confirmed in righteousness and sin would not have entered the world. “The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience” (Westminster Conf.; BC 6.038).

Adam, of course, disobeyed God and, as our representative, brought the curse of God upon all of humanity. Humanity was rendered spiritually dead and incapable of coming unto God or doing any spiritual good. Humanity was condemned, rightly according to the terms of the covenant. However, where sin abounded, grace did much more abound! “Man, by his Fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace: wherein he freely offered unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life, his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe” (Westminster Conf.; BC 6.039). Although this covenant appears chronologically in response to the failure of humanity in the covenant of works, it is really an outworking of the divine decree “from before the foundation of the world” to call a people out unto himself through his Son. This agreement of God the Father and God the Son in eternity is sometimes termed the “covenant of redemption”; the Father would give the Son a people for having become incarnate and lain down his life for them (cf., e.g. John 6:37-39). Before creation, the Father gave a people unto the Son for him to redeem upon their fall into sin. Thus, it may be said that history is the outworking of the covenant of redemption.

All the other covenants in Scripture are subsets, so to speak, of the two main covenants of works and of grace. The Abrahamic covenant, for instance, included offspring and land, but was fundamentally a part of the covenant of grace. In entering into covenant with Abraham, God guaranteed the validity of his promise by taking a self-maledictory oath of his own. He told Abram to bring him a heifer, goat, and ram, along with a dove and a pigeon, all of which Abram cut in two, except for the birds. “When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces” (Gen. 15:17), indicating God’s willingness to be torn in half should he fail to give Abram the promised offspring and land. God subsequently fulfilled the promise of land (cf. Josh. 23:9-16) and the promise of offspring in Isaac. In Gen. 17, God called upon Abram and his male offspring (since they would head each family) to take their own self-maledictory oath in being circumcised. Circumcision indicated that anyone

who was not faithful to God's covenant should be cut off from God and his people, just as the foreskin had been cut. Thus Abraham was to place himself, his offspring and all he had in faithful service to his covenanting Lord.

The consummation of God's promise of a seed is fulfilled in Christ (Gal. 3:16). Hence, all who believe the gospel, "declared beforehand to Abraham" (Gal. 3:8), are also Abraham's seed (Gal. 3:29). The covenant of grace, then, has been differently administered: "in the time of the law," "by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all fore-signifying Christ to come," while "under the gospel, when Christ the substance was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed, are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper." "There are not, therefore, two different covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations" (Westminster Conf.; BC 6:041-42). Through one covenant of grace, God has called to himself, through Christ's sacrifice prefigured in the old covenant and completed in the new covenant, one people, his church. Thus, "since there is always but one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, Jesus the Messiah, and one Shepherd of the whole flock, one Head of this body, and, to conclude, one Spirit, one salvation, one faith, one Testament or covenant, it necessarily follows that there is only one Church" (Second Helvetic Conf.; BC 5.126). The church did not begin at Pentecost, but began with the implementation of the covenant of grace in Adam and continues to the end of the world and the final redemption of all those God has chosen to call to himself.

God's people are called in this covenant to live disciplined lives, to be holy as God is holy. *Disciple* means "student" and comes from the word *discipline*, meaning, fundamentally, "a regimen of study." As disciples of Jesus Christ, Christians are to live disciplined lives. We may not do whatever we wish, but rather, what our Lord wishes for us. In a cultural climate of rampant consumerism and self-indulgence, it takes strength of commitment and steady focus, i.e., discipline to resist such a mentality. "Live by the Spirit" and "do not gratify the desires of the flesh," Paul said (Gal. 5:16). The works of the flesh, sexual immorality, drunkenness, factions, strife, and more, are almost cultural norms today; "those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:21). "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" and are guided by God's Spirit, bearing fruit for Jesus' glory (Gal. 5:22-25). Covenant life must be disciplined, guided by God's Word and Spirit, to prevent the chaos inevitable in personal preferences, fleshly desires, and cultural norms. Hence, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has a Book of Order which is to govern its "form of government, worship, and discipline." If we are to live together as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we must abide by the rule of order. No person and no presbytery can claim

exemption from what must govern us all. The true church, the Scots Confession urges, is evidenced by "the true preaching of the Word of God," "the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus," and "ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God's Word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished" (BC 3.18).

Questions for Discussion:

1. What does "covenant" mean to you? Read Lev. 26. What are the rewards for obedience and curses for disobedience to God's covenant?

2. Review "The Historic Principles of Church Order" in the *Book of Order* (G-1.0300). Discuss the significance of discipline to an ordered church life.

9. Faithful Stewardship

Stewardship is often associated with financial programs of the church, but it involves much more. The word translated *steward* in the New Testament is generally the Greek word *oikonomia*, from which we get our word *economy*, but the idea behind this word surpasses finances. Instead, it entails a responsibility that has been entrusted to one who was generally a slave of the owner of an estate. In other words, *stewardship* had to do with caring for what was not one's own, managing it responsibly in the knowledge that one would have to give an account to the owner.

God is the owner of all that we have, of all we manage. We are stewards of what is his.

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.²³

All of life is to be lived under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In everything Christians do, particularly those who serve as church officers, the guiding principles should be obedience to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5), glorifying Christ and giving thanks to God (Col. 3:17).

In speaking of a stewardship that "shuns ostentation," the *Book of Order* follows the life and witness of John Calvin in urging simplicity and moderation. This was certainly an emphasis found in Reformed meetinghouses, known for their austerity so the focus would be completely on God and his Word and not on pictures and anything else that might distract the mind and heart from the call of

God. Thus, the Heidelberg Catechism insists, pictures may not be tolerated in churches in place of books for the unlearned, “for we must not try to be wiser than God who does not want his people to be taught by means of lifeless idols, but through the living preaching of his Word” (Q. 98; BC 4.098). The focus must be on the hearing, receiving, and living out of God’s Word by his Spirit.

Instead of selfishly utilizing our resources for personal gain and pleasure, those who hear, receive, and live out God’s Word by his Spirit will “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others better” than themselves (Phil. 2:3), for such was the mind of Christ. A heartfelt concern to utilize what God has placed in our trust should have wide-ranging significance in seeking social and economic justice for all.

The church cannot condone poverty, whether it is the product of unjust social structures, exploitation of the defenseless, lack of national resources, absence of technological understanding, or rapid expansion of populations. The church calls every man to use his abilities, his possessions, and the fruits of technology as gifts entrusted to him by God for the maintenance of his family and the advancement of the common welfare (Conf. of 1967; BC 9.46).

Stewardship thus entails overcoming our innate tendency to sin, selfishness, and slavery to materialism. Stewardship recognizes that whatever we have is a gift of God to be cared for, invested, and used for the glory of God and the benefit of others. Our families are to be cared for first and “managed well.” Overseers and deacons, in particular, are called upon to manage their households and children well (1 Tim. 3:4-5, 12), for if they cannot manage their own household, how will they be able to take care of God’s church? Our families, then, are a stewardship from God; our spouses and children do not belong to us, but have been given us to care for, to invest ourselves in, and to nurture, in the knowledge that we must give an account to God, to whom they belong. Husbands must love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (Eph. 5:21-32). The family must be a priority for the church, since, as Calvin said, the family is “a little church.” The proclamation of the Word, prayer, and study should characterize each individual Christian’s day and each Christian family’s day, as much as possible, culminating in the worship of each individual and each family in the corporate worship of the church on Sunday.

Care for our families and for the church must extend to care for all who we can help, with the abilities, possessions, and technologies entrusted to us as gifts of God for the common welfare. We must see our jobs not merely as a means to make money to purchase things for ourselves, but as a means “to have something to share with the needy” (Eph. 4:28). We must see the abilities we have not simply as talents to be used for our own gain or pleasure, but also for the benefit of others. Christians must recognize that everyone who has been born of God’s

Spirit has been “given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). All should seek to know and utilize the gifts God has given them for the building up of the body and the sharing of the gospel. Finally, while stewardship is more than talk about finances, it does have a financial aspect to it: each Christian should give as the Lord has prospered him. If the tithe (10%) was the expectation for giving under the old covenant, that should at least be our base under the new. Moreover, we should really want to give, “for if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has” (2 Cor. 8:12).

Questions for Discussion:

1. We often speak of a church as “my church” or “[pastor’s name] church,” but it’s really “the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son” (Acts 20:28). How does thinking of the church in that way affect your commitment and leadership?
2. How are you managing your family? Where can you improve so that you might be better able to manage God’s church?
3. Is the congregation under your care eager to give of their time, talents, and treasures? Why or why not?

10. Recognizing the Tendency to Idolatry

The 1983 Brief Statement of Faith declares, “the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of people long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace” (BC 10.4). This encapsulates the last of the “other great themes of the Reformed tradition,” namely, “The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God” (G-2.0500a[4]).

Idolatry, according to the Heidelberg Catechism, “is to imagine or possess something in which to put one’s trust in place of or beside the one true God who has revealed himself in his Word” (Q. 95; BC 4.095). We have just discussed the importance of stewardship, by which we are to understand ourselves as caretakers of all that God has placed in our trust. If we have a proper sense of stewardship, our tendency to idolatry should diminish accordingly; however, since the tendency to idolatry and tyranny is inherent in our sinful nature, it is something against which we must constantly struggle. Idolatry is not simply about worshiping other gods or having little statues in our house to which we pay some devotion; rather, idolatry is any violation of the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.” “Before me,”

is not to be understood as allowing other gods, as long as Yahweh, the covenanting God of Scripture, is first! No, “before me” is to be understood as “in my presence,” i.e., we are to have no other gods at all! Idolatry is placing anything of our own in place of God in our lives. Martin Luther summarized the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny in his Larger Catechism:

Many a person thinks he has God and everything he needs when he has money and property; in them he trusts and of them he boasts so stubbornly and securely that he cares for no one. Surely such a man also has a god—mammon by name, that is, money and possessions—on which he fixes his whole heart. It is the most common idol on earth.... So, too, if anyone boasts of great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family, and honor, and trusts in them, he also has a god, but not the one, true God. Notice, again, how presumptuous, secure, and proud people become because of such possessions, and how despondent when they lack them or are deprived of them. Therefore, I repeat, to have a God properly means to have something in which the heart trusts completely.²⁴

There can be little doubt that such idolatry has a hold on much of our culture and, yes, the church as well. The church needs, then, to speak out against the place of pride, power, and prestige that our culture often mistakenly associates with certain attainments of education, occupation, or wealth. Do we really believe, for instance, that those who are “greedy” are, along with idolaters and the sexually immoral, drunkard or robber, not to enter the kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9-11)? Do we “command [those who are rich] not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment”? Do we tell them “they are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life” (1 Tim. 6:17-19)? Do we give special place and privilege to those with wealth, in violation of Scripture (Jas. 2:1-7)? Are there idolatries of power and privilege we need to unmask in the church?

The church has often throughout its history taken the side of those with power and privilege. This has almost inevitably been to the church’s shame. Instead, the church is called to stand particularly with the poor, the oppressed, and speak on behalf of those without a voice or without rights. There is little notoriety or worldly gain to be achieved from such a stance, but it is in keeping with the way of our Lord Jesus Christ. Remember how Mary, the mother of our Lord, in the *Magnificat*, said God “has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:52-53). The church must speak out against the idolatries and tyranny of power and privilege and act on behalf of the poor, lowly, and distressed. In so doing, the church shows her continuation of the ministry of Jesus in the world.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Who holds places of leadership in the congregation which you lead? Does social, economic, or educational status have anything to do with who holds leadership?

2. What is your congregation’s ministry to the poor, the lowly, the needy, and those without voice and without rights?

3. How does this affirmation fit with another of your vows: “Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?”

Conclusion

This study has attempted to summarize the main teachings of *The Book of Confessions* on the central affirmations of the Reformed faith, as delineated in our *Book of Order*, so that elders and deacons are better able to answer in an informed manner the questions germane to the confessions at their ordination and/or installation. Serving as an elder or deacon in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a great privilege, but also a great responsibility. Those who have been entrusted with this privilege of leadership must undertake it in an informed way so they are better able to carry out their responsibilities in accord with the Word of God as it has been understood in the Reformed tradition.

1. Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) 17.
 2. Cliff Kirkpatrick, *Our Confessional Foundations in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, <http://www.pcusa.org/oga/perspectives/jun-confessional.htm>.
 3. Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds*, 21.
 4. Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994) 129.
 5. The words “generally believed” are used advisedly here, because there are some variations within the creeds themselves. These creeds arose within particular historical circumstances and theological controversies and so speak specifically to those issues. Beyond that, however, there have been modifications of these creeds subsequent to their original context, either in regard to translation issues or in regard to ongoing theological disputes. Thus, for example, the received form of the Apostles’ Creed followed earlier versions of an ancient Roman baptismal symbol in speaking of “the resurrection of the flesh” (*carnis resurrectionem*). Although “the older English translations of the Creed had the literal rendering *flesh (caro, sarx)*, by which the ancient Church protested against spiritualistic conceptions of the Gnostics,” this translation was discarded due to the possibility of being “misunderstood in a grossly materialistic sense, while the resurrection of the *body* is unobjectionable” (Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* [6th ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker rep., 1990] 2:46n.). Hence, “the resurrection of the body” has become the standard English translation in the Apostles’ Creed.
- The “descent into hell” passage of the Apostles’ Creed is even more problematic, both as to its origin, reception into the creed, and its meaning. It was unknown in the older creeds and first appeared among Latin creeds in the fifth century. In the Eastern church the words were found earlier in Arian creeds. There are, moreover, at least three interpretations of the words, all of which have problems. On the various interpretations, see Randall E. Otto, “*Descendit in Inferna: A Reformed Review of a Creedal Conundrum*,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990):143-150 where, because of the dubious intention behind its insertion and “the fact that no consensus has been or apparently can be reached on its meaning,” the recommendation is made to omit it from liturgical use; cited with approval by Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 594.

- The Reformers also reinterpreted the nature of the communion of saints and holy catholic church; on which, see Alister McGrath, *Historical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 200-207. The Eastern Church does not include “the descent into hell” or “the communion of saints” in its version of the Apostles’ Creed. Further, its omission of the *filioque* from the Nicene Creed, added by the Western Church in the 11th Century to denote the double procession of the Spirit from the Father “and the Son,” follows from the Eastern view that the statement compromises the unity of the Godhead found in the Father as the single source of the Trinity (Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* [London: Penguin, 1964] 218-223). All of this is to say that there is no complete uniformity even in the universal statements of Christian belief.
6. Douglas F. Ottati (*Confessional Standards for a Confessing Church: The Confession of 1967 and the Book of Confessions* [Louisville: Geneva, 2005]) observes that, “when Westminster was the sole confessional standard, there were strong and regular pressures to revise it when it appeared to be at odds with the church’s current faith, practice, or theology.” He cites sections in the Confession on the civil magistrate, marriage and divorce, and predestination, among others, as evidence of revisions from the original 1647 text.
 7. Kirkpatrick, *Our Confessional Foundations in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, <http://www.pcusa.org/oga/perspectives/jun-confessional.htm>.
 8. Kirkpatrick (“Our Confessional Foundations”) and Rogers (*Presbyterian Creeds*, 24) both list “the authority of Scripture” under the Protestant “watchwords.” While it is true that the Reformation accented the principle of *sola scriptura*, the “faith of the Church catholic” in G-2.0300 clearly includes “the recognition of the canonical Scriptures.” Hence, the Reformation was a return to the sources (*ad fontes*) acknowledged by the Church catholic.
 9. Darrell L. Guder, “So Great a Cloud of Witnesses: How the Confessions Instruct and Lead the Practice of Ordained Ministry,” *The Ordination Vows and Study Guide* (ed. M. Craig Barnes, et al.; Louisville: Presbyterians for Renewal, 1998) 22.
 10. All Scripture citations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
 11. The interested reader would do well to consult, e.g., F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988).
 12. *Ibid.*
 13. A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (New York: Robert Carter & Bros., 1875) 107.
 14. John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20* (Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David A. Hubbard; Waco: Word, 1989) ad 1:35 (CD ROM edition).
 15. More on Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament cloud motif may be found in Randall Otto, *Coming in the Clouds* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994) 135-147.
 16. Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) 105.
 17. See, e.g., William W. Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).
 18. R. P. Shedd, *Man in Community* (London: Epworth, 1958) 133.
 19. Klein, *New Chosen People*, 260.

20. J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St Paul* (Winona Lake, IN: Alpha, n.d.) 312. The Scots Confession’s chapter on “Election” takes much this same stance; after saying that God “chose us in his Son Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world was laid,” it then goes into detail explicating why God the Son had to become human to redeem a people unto himself.
21. Ernest Best, *Ephesians*. International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998) 120.
22. This section is taken from Randall Otto, “The Remnant Church,” *Journal of Christian Theological Research* 7 (2002): 15-29 (<http://www.luthersem.edu/ctrf/JCTR/default.htm#Volume%207>).
23. Bob Davis, “Essential Tenets and Reformed Distinctives: Discussion Questions,” *Theology Matters* 10 (May/June 2004:13).
24. Luther, *What Does This Mean? Luther’s Catechisms Today* (ed. Phillip E. Pederson; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) 58.

**Visit our web site at
www.theologymatters.com for additional
resources to use in teaching the Confessions**

**Please consider making a donation today to
this vital ministry.**

**Consider giving someone the gift of
supporting *Theology Matters* for Christmas.
We will send an acknowledgement of your gift
in a Christmas Card.**

**Theology Matters
P.O. Box 10249
Blacksburg, VA 24062**

**Visit our web site for back issues at
www.theologymatters.com**

The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Rev. Susan Cyre is Executive Director and Editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes 12 people, clergy and lay, women and men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the PC(USA)’s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian world view. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it.

Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry
P.O. Box 10249
Blacksburg, VA 24062-0249

Change Service Requested

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
AUTOMATED
MAILING
SYSTEM