

WHAT WE BELIEVE

ESSENTIAL TENETS OF THE REFORMED FAITH

“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 above is one of the ordination vows answered as officers are ordained and installed as Elders, Deacons, or Ministers of Word and Sacrament. Every officer 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?

The essential tenets are our foundational convictions, drawn from Scripture and 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 Presbytery of San Diego in June 2003 adopted a summary of the “Essential Tenets and Reformed Distinctives” for use in our churches, committees, and presbytery. “What We Believe” is an attempt to make more accessible that summary of our core beliefs. It has been written in response to Recommendation 3 of the Task Force on the Way Forward’s Final Report, dated November 2006. “What We Believe,” which combines the 2003 document’s six essentials and seven reformed directives into eight summary statements, is commended as a tool for teaching, training and evaluation.

It is our hope that ministers, elders and deacons who’ve answered “Yes” to the ordination question quoted above will welcome this briefer statement of our foundational convictions. Both “What We Believe” and “Essential Tenets and Reformed Distinctives” are intended by the Presbytery to be reviewed and updated periodically.

To view the complete “Essential Tenets and Reformed Distinctives” document, including “What is Not Affirmed” and “Questions for Examination,” go to the Presbytery of San Diego’s website, www.PresbyterySD.org, and click on Resources.

GOD AND THE TRINITY

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

God 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 human beings whom God created as moral creatures. The exercise of free will by human beings has resulted in great social, 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 work in all things to further God's good purposes. God opposes all evil and will certainly bring creation to a glorious consummation.

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)

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*



**Glorify Him
and enjoy Him
forever.**

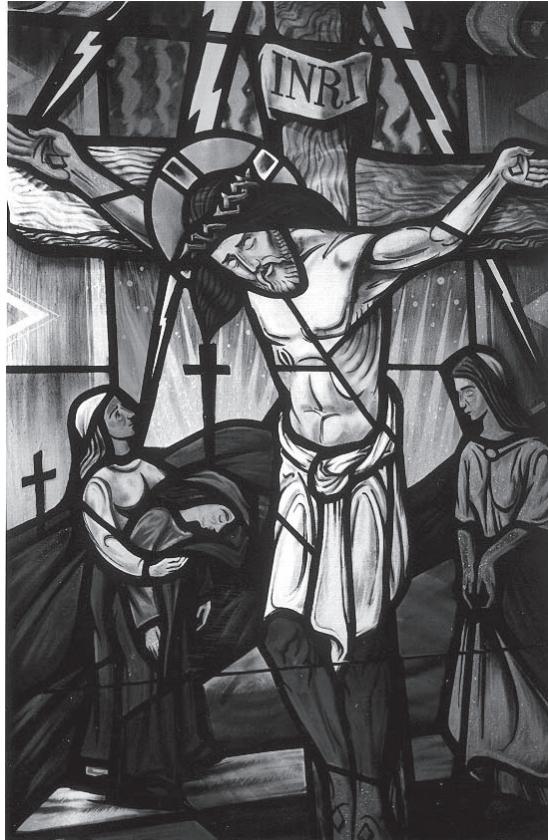
JESUS CHRIST

In the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the eternal Son of God uniquely entered human history and became a real human being, fully God and fully human. 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.

Jesus Christ is God's only mediator between God and humankind and God's unique agent for the salvation of the world, accomplished through the death of Jesus on the cross. In his death Jesus was the perfect sacrifice for sins —“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29)

Scripture also describes the death of Jesus as a ransom or redemption from slavery (Mark 10:45); payment of a debt; a shepherd's life given for his sheep; vicarious satisfaction of a legal penalty; victory over the powers of evil; a sacrificial substitution (Christ's death for our death); an actual event through which a way is opened for human beings to be reconciled with a holy God; a way in which sins are covered, forgiven, and removed. The death of Jesus is the historic event through which 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)

**Sinners who confess
Jesus as Lord are
reconciled to a holy God.**



On the sole basis of the finished work of Christ on the cross, sinners who confess Jesus as Lord are reconciled to a holy God and are participants in the resurrection of Christ, set free to live for God in holiness and joy. Jesus is the perfect expression of what humanity was designed to be. Jesus is the supreme authority over every human authority, over the church, and over our individual moral choices. As Jesus said and we confirm: “I am the Way, The Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6).

The risen Lord Jesus Christ has been exalted to the place of honor beside God the Father. Jesus Christ the eternal Son, now Lord of heaven and earth, now advocating and interceding on behalf of the church.

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 fulness and perfection, we say, “Come Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:20)

Scripture

Matthew 1:21-23; Luke 1:31-35, 13:22-30; John 1:1-3, 14-18; Romans 3:25, 5:18-19; 1 Corinthians 1:23-25; 15:3; 2 Corinthians 5:19, 21; Ephesians 1:19-23; Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 1:1-3, 9:11-12; 1 Timothy 2:4-5; 1 Peter 3:18; 1 John 2:2, 4:2-4

Confessions

Nicene Creed 1.1-1.2

Scots Confession 3.09

Heidelberg Catechism 4.031, 4.037

Westminster Confession of Faith 6.044

Confession of 1967 9.07-9.09

Brief Statement of Faith 10.2

THE HOLY SPIRIT



We believe that the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is the power of God that makes faith real in our lives. By the Spirit, people of faith cry "Abba" as God's adopted children.

The Spirit awakens from spiritual death those whom God has chosen, convicts them of sin, comforts them with the hope of the Gospel, seals their faith, unites them with Christ and with the church, the Body of Christ. The Spirit teaches and leads believers in God's right ways and empowers them to love and serve God.

We believe that God the Holy Spirit fulfilled the prophecy of Joel by coming upon the believers at Pentecost, and that from then on the Holy Spirit is given to Christians upon conversion. God the Holy Spirit baptizes every Christian into the Body of Christ, empowers and gifts us all for ministry, and also produces the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Christians are born of the Spirit, led by the Spirit, and sanctified by the Spirit. God the Holy Spirit teaches Christians, guiding us into all truth through the Bible which the Holy Spirit inspired. God the Holy Spirit testifies about and glorifies Jesus.

The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in the individual and collective life of believers in Jesus effects real transformation—a life of increasing holiness, righteousness, power, and love, as they are changed more and more into the image of Christ. The Spirit connects Christians to the life of Christ and releases in them the supernatural and saving power of Christ's life, death, resurrection, and glory.

Scripture

*Psalm 139:16; John 15:5, 8, 16; Ephesians 1:4-7, 11-13; Ephesians 2:10; 2 Timothy 1:9
Romans 8:29; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 6:11; Galatians 5:22-25; Philippians 2:12-13; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Corinthians 3:18, Acts 1:8, John 14:26*

Confessions

Scots Confession 3.08, 3.12

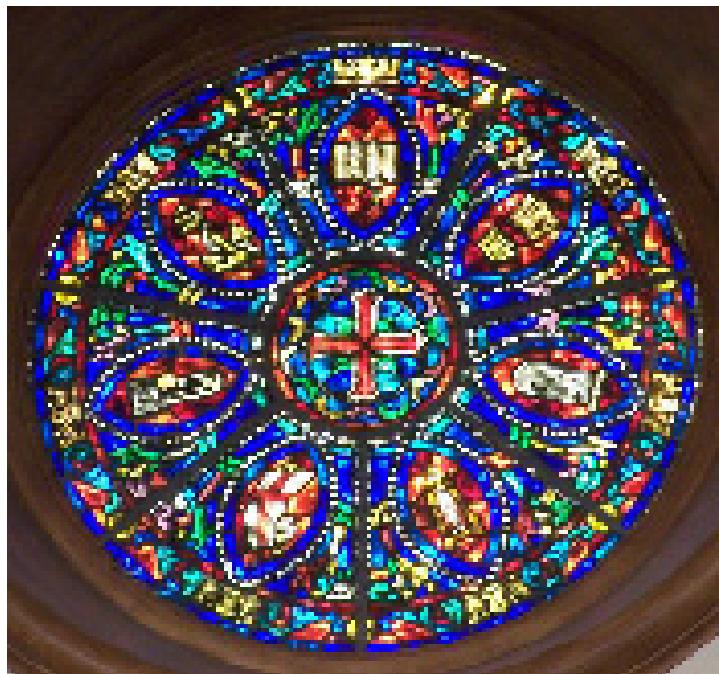
Westminster Confession of Faith 6.075-6.077

Shorter Catechism 7.035

Larger Catechism 7.188

Barmen Declaration 8.15

**The Spirit connects
believers to the life
of Christ.**



SCRIPTURE, GOD'S WORD

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 for all people in every age.

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.

We believe the ongoing revelation of the Holy Spirit will always be consistent with Scripture.

"All Scripture is God-breathed

and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17)."

Scripture is the church's first and final authority.

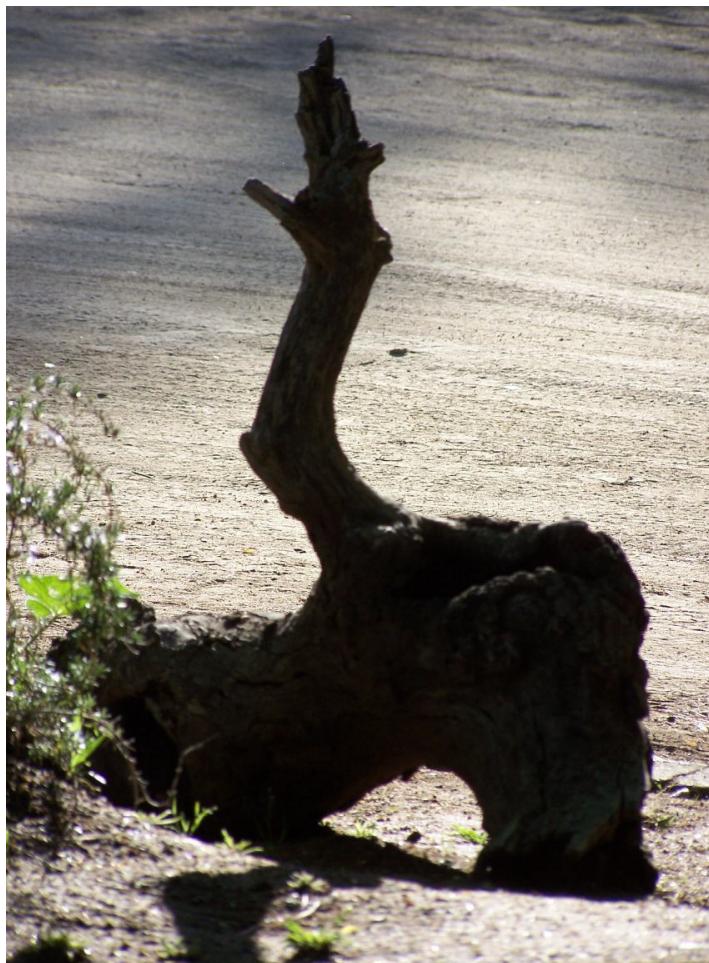
Scripture

*Matthew 4:4; 1 Thessalonians 2:13;
2 Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 4:12*

Confessions

*Second Helvetic Confession 5.001, 5.003, 5.010
Westminster Confession of Faith 6.006, 6.009
Larger Catechism 7.113-114*

THE HUMAN CONDITION



God created human beings good and in God's own image. Humans were created to know, love, and obey God, and to be righteous stewards of creation. However instead of acknowledging, worshipping and obeying God, we rebel and bring sin and death upon ourselves and all creation.

No human remedy can repair the radical brokenness and corruption sin has wrought upon humanity. Human beings are in bondage to sin and subject to God's holy judgment. Without God's intervening grace and salvation, we are lost and condemned. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

But, thanks be to God: "In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." (1 Peter 1:3)

Scripture

*Genesis 1:26-27; Psalms 51:5, 143:2;
Jeremiah 17:9
Matthew 15:19-20; Romans 3:10-23; 5:18-19;
7:18-23; 8:7; Ephesians 2:1-3, 1 Peter 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*

**In His great mercy He
has given us new birth.**

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. The righteousness of Christ is accredited to those who believe in him, resulting in their right standing before God.

Faith is the fruit and effect of the inner work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of human beings. 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.

Integral to this faith is the act of repentance: a turning away from sin and a turning to God, relying upon Christ alone for our reconciliation. Repentance is ongoing, a part of the process of sanctification--God's act of grace whereby we live more and more to righteousness and less and less to sin.

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, election. It is God's gracious purpose for our life and it is for God's glory.

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



**Salvation is
a gift of
God's grace.**

COVENANT AND COVENANT LIFE

God's covenants had different forms and details at different times in salvation history, but they reflected a single sovereign and gracious purpose to redeem, sanctify, and preserve a people who belonged to God.

The divine covenant was always initiated by God; it was sustained by God's faithfulness in spite of humankind's history of unfaithfulness; it was an expression of God's steadfast love (*Hebrew, hesed*); and it reached a culmination and fullness in the "new covenant" (Luke 22:20) established and perfected by Jesus Christ.

Those who confess their sins and turn from them in repentance, putting their faith in Christ, are spiritually united with Christ and participate in the new covenant where there is salvation and redemption.

Jesus Christ is Lord of every area of a believer's 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, and to bring glory to the name of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.



Believers become members of the covenant community called the church, and enjoy the covenant promises of eternal life and blessing.

In our covenant life together, the church celebrates two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper. The 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

*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*

Believers become members of the covenant community called the church.

THE CHURCH AND ITS MISSION

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

The church's mission is:

- To proclaim to all the world the good news of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ
- To demonstrate, tangibly yet imperfectly, the new reality God intends for humanity 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.

The church, which includes every disciple of Jesus Christ, 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.*

Proclaim the Good News of Salvation!

Photographs by Bob Battenfield

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