

ESSENTIAL TENETS AND REFORMED DISTINCTIVES

Guidelines for

**Preparing and evaluating candidates through
the Committee on Preparation for Ministry**

**Directing incoming ministers through
the Committee on Ministry
and the Presbytery of Stockton**

Education and Training

Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. (II Timothy 1:13-14; ESV)

ESSENTIAL TENETS AND REFORMED DISTINCTIVES

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WHAT ARE THE ESSENTIAL TENETS?

“Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?” (Book of Order, W-4.003c)

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

What are the essential tenets?

Foundational convictions. The essential tenets are our foundational convictions, contained in our creeds and confessions, that bear witness to God’s grace in Jesus Christ. “They guide the church in its study and interpretation of the Scriptures; they summarize the essence of Reformed Christian tradition; they direct the church in maintaining sound doctrines; they equip the church for its work of proclamation.” (F-2.01)

The Presbytery of Stockton adopts this summary of the essential tenets of the Christian faith and of our Reformed distinctives for use in our churches, committees, and presbytery. It distills the nearly 300 pages of the Book of Confessions to a helpful summary—six essentials and seven distinctives.

As nominating committees consider candidates for church office, as PNCs interview prospective pastors, as elders examine newly-elected elders and deacons, as CPMs prepare candidates for ministry, and as COMs consider receiving ordained clergy into Presbytery, it is their responsibility to ensure that the essential tenets of the Reformed faith have been understood and sincerely received and adopted as the Constitution requires. We commend this summary as a tool for teaching, training, and evaluation.

A confessional heritage. Reformed Christians have never been at a loss to explain what they believe. We love explaining our faith. It is a distinguishing mark of our heritage. John Calvin’s Institutes, the most influential and seminal work of Reformed theology, established the theological precedent with a near-exhaustive and systematic explanation of the cardinal truths of Christianity. Since Calvin, the proliferation of Reformed creeds, confessions, catechisms, and other theological works is a robust continuation of this thoughtful and devout impulse to explain our faith—speaking in the language and to the issues of each generation.

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

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

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

- To explain is to proclaim. The gospel—which is “the power of God for salvation” (Rom 1:16)—is released into the church and into the world;
- Our faith is clarified and strengthened;
- We prove ourselves faithful stewards of the “sound teaching...guarding with the help of the Holy Spirit what was entrusted to us” by the prophets and apostles (2Tim 1:13-14);
- We fulfill one of the great ends of the church—“the preservation of the truth” (F-1.0304) and we “identify the church as a community of people known by its convictions” (F-2.01);
- We obey Jesus’ command to “love the Lord our God with...all our mind” (Matt 22:37); and
- The revealed truth of God is articulated and distinguished from the ideologies and errors of the world.

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

How will this summary be used?

- As a tool for instructing our congregations in the foundational truths of our faith.
- As a reference for training our prospective church officers as they prepare to take vows and enter office.
- As guidelines for communicating to prospective ministers our theological expectations concerning what Reformed ministers must sincerely believe and proclaim.
- As guidelines to be used by the accrediting bodies of presbytery at their discretion for the theological examination and evaluation of candidates.

Why this summary is needed. First, because “theology matters”—to quote the most memorable phrase from the 1994 General Assembly. What we believe—the content of our faith—matters. If it matters, we should be able to articulate it and to explain how this truth stands against the competing truths of the world.

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

Scenarios. Consider the following scenarios:

- A CPM committee is interviewing a candidate for pastoral ministry. His statement of faith is vague at several key points—the Trinity, the Person of Christ, etc. As the committee asks questions about basic Christian doctrines, his inability to express a coherent theology becomes apparent. They feel badly, because he is obviously a sincere Christian; he wants very much to be ordained and in ministry; and he’s given three years of his life to attend seminary. Nobody is finally willing to put the brakes on the process because there is no general consensus what the theological standards or boundaries are—and so the candidate is passed on to presbytery for trials and approval.
- A PNC is interviewing a candidate for the position of pastor. She is very appealing on paper and in person. She feels right for their church. Nobody bothers to ask questions about her theology. They assume that if she got this far, she must be a certified Presbyterian; her theology must be okay. Besides, the committee is composed entirely of lay people, none of whom feels competent to evaluate an ordained pastor on her theology. Only one of the committee members actually admits to having read the Book of Confessions, but he could not tell you what the Reformed “essentials” are. Imagine how empowering it would be if the PNC had such a list—guidelines they could use to ask questions that would help them discern and evaluate their next pastor’s theological convictions.
- At a meeting of Presbytery the COM is presenting for approval the new pastor just called by Brookdale Presbyterian Church. A delegation of 50 people from Brookdale are attending the meeting to show how excited they are about their new pastor; in fact, he’s already purchased a house in town and moved his family out. During the usual questioning, the candidate expresses theological views that you (and several others) consider more Unitarian than Presbyterian—and your questions for clarification only raise further concerns. It turns out, the COM experienced the same confusion when they interviewed the candidate, but because there was no official summary of “the essentials,” no consensus about what were “theological non-negotiables,” the committee felt unequipped to qualify or disqualify him on these grounds. So they decided simply to refer him to Presbytery; let Presbytery decide. At Presbytery, the momentum to approve the installation proves overwhelming. Many go home feeling the process is profoundly compromised and ultimately failed.
- A week before a newly elected elder is to be installed at your church, she comes to the pastor and says, “I see that I must take a vow that I ‘receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith.’ Pastor, I know what you preach and teach—and I mainly agree with it,” she says, “but I don’t know what Presbyterian means. To be able to take this vow with integrity, I need to know what the essentials are. You gave me this 300-page Book of Confessions—and a lot of it is really good stuff—but not all of it seems equally important, and some of it we obviously don’t believe anymore. Can you tell me which of these tenets are essential?”

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

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

“Terms of admission.” The CPM and the COM are the primary credentialing committees of our presbytery; they perform a legitimate and necessary gatekeeping function that is delegated to them by Presbytery. Yet it is difficult to assess and evaluate candidates’ theology because of the lack of clear guidelines that stake out the boundaries of our Reformed essentials. Pastors, presbytery commissioners, PNC and COM members all share this frustration. We are not looking for an exhaustive list of all the Reformed truths; we are trying simply to identify the foundational truths—non-negotiables, essentials.

Our historic principles of church government—in the opening chapters of the Book of Order—explicitly state: “...every Christian church, or union or association of particular churches [such as the Presbytery of Stockton], is entitled to declare the terms of admission into its communion, and the qualifications of its ministers and members.” (F-3.0102). That is exactly what this summary is—a good-faith attempt to declare the theological terms of admission into our communion. Being a Reformed teaching elder or ruling elder or deacon means something. And we owe it, in integrity, to our members to be able to declare what it means.

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

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

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

A working document. We know no human summary is perfect. Consequently, these tenets constitute a working document that is open to amendment, clarification, and improvement as the Holy Spirit leads us and gives clearer understanding. We will provide for a committee of Presbytery to have stewardship of the Essential Tenets and Reformed Distinctives, to receive and evaluate amendments submitted by commissioners or by overture of sessions, and to recommend and refer proposed revisions back to Presbytery for action.

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

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

While we believe this summary of essentials and distinctives will prove helpful in training, educating, and guiding, it may prove a blunt and inappropriate instrument in specific pastoral situations which require sensitivity and compassion. In this context, the example of Jesus should always be followed, who never compromised God’s truth, but was always a “friend of sinners” and unfailingly inclusive in showing love and mercy.

Membership vs. leadership. The constitution of the PC (U.S.A.) distinguishes between the criteria for membership in its churches and the standards for its leaders. The only essential requirement for membership is a profession of faith. The Presbytery of Stockton affirms that all persons who respond in trust and obedience to God’s grace in Jesus Christ may become part of the membership and ministry of his Church. The standards for church leaders, on the other hand, are understandably stricter:

- “Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world.” (G-2.0104a)
- “The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate’s ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003).” (G-2.0104b)
- “It is necessary to the integrity and health of the church that the persons who serve it in ordered ministries *shall adhere to the essentials of the Reformed faith* and polity as expressed in this Constitution.” (G-2.0105) [*Italics added*]

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

God alone is Lord of the conscience and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are *in anything contrary to his Word*, or beside it, in *matters of faith or worship*. (F-3.0101a) [italics added]

In other words, precisely where God’s Word has spoken and precisely in matters of faith and worship—that is where our conscience is bound and not free. Being an ordained Presbyterian means doing ministry within specific theological boundaries:

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

In this paragraph our constitution indicates: (1) becoming an officer imposes limits on our theological liberty; (2) our confessions are the authoritative standard for interpreting the Bible; (3) as long as we are in office, we are bound by that authority and those standards; (4) determining whether a person is theologically in or out of bounds is initially the responsibility of that individual; and (5) evaluating the confessional integrity of a member of presbytery is ultimately the presbytery’s responsibility.

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

There may be ordained Presbyterians who, in their education and personal development, realize that their true convictions never were or are no longer Presbyterian. This is an issue of confessional integrity that they must wrestle with and resolve. Will we be led and guided by our confessions—even through our personal changes? “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” (Isaiah 40:8; ESV) Some may complain that this document is too focused on doctrine. That is because this is a document about what Presbyterians essentially believe. Yes, the Christian faith is about much more than doctrine. It is about God finding us and our finding salvation, community, healing, love, and life in all its fullness. But these wonderful realities are founded on certain truths revealed in God’s Word. That’s why theology matters and why doctrine is foundational and critically important. Choosing to be Presbyterian means understanding and embracing Presbyterian doctrine.

Therefore, it is entirely appropriate and even necessary for the ordained leadership of the church to diligently direct, teach, correct, and make inquiry concerning the doctrines that elders, deacons, and ministers of Word and Sacrament “sincerely receive and adopt”— that these doctrines are consistent with the Bible and our Reformed standards.

This document—6 essentials and 7 distinctives—is our thoughtful and intentional effort to fulfill that responsibility.

SECTION 1

ESSENTIAL TENETS

AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Affirmation

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are God’s uniquely revealed and written Word, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and are the church’s first and final authority in all areas of faith and life including, but not limited to, theological doctrine, mission, church order, character, and ethical behavior.

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

Scripture

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

Confessions

Second Helvetic Confession 5.001, 5.003, 5.010

Westminster Confession of Faith 6.006, 6.009 Larger

Catechism 7.113-114

What is Not Affirmed

Any doctrine—

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

Orthodox reformed faith does not include any notion of a Church “reformed and reforming” that moves outside the boundaries of the authority of Christ and confession of his Lordship which are clearly revealed in Scripture. Nor does it include any ecclesiology or morality that attempts to subvert the headship of Jesus Christ and the authority of Scripture in the interests of an “inclusive” and overbroad institutional concern for “unity, peace, and purity.”

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

GOD

Affirmation

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

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

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

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

Grace. God is a God of love. In grace God chooses to show love and mercy. When we were dead in trespasses and sin, God made us alive with Christ, saving us by grace through faith, as a sheer gift of sovereign love.

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

Scripture

Genesis 1:1; Exodus 20:4-5; Deuteronomy 6:4; Psalm 47:2; Isaiah 45:5 Matthew 28:19; Luke 1:35; John 4:24; 14:26; Romans 1:23; 8:28; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 1:7-11; Jude 1:25; Revelation 4:11

Confessions

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

What Is Not Affirmed

Any doctrine—

- that denies this doctrine of God's triune nature, or refuses to confess the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit;
- that minimizes this doctrine as an unessential or secondary Christian tenet;
- that asserts that all religions are essentially true, that all religious beliefs are essentially in accord; or that the views of God held by the world's major religions are equally valid;
- that confesses or celebrates belief in multiple gods or goddesses, or that identifies God as a goddess, or that worships God's uncreated glory through idols or images representing creatures or creation.

The biblical doctrine of God's sovereignty excludes:

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

HUMANITY—ORIGINAL RIGHTEOUSNESS AND FALL INTO SIN

Affirmation

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

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

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

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

Scripture

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

Confessions

Scots Confession 3.03 Heidelberg Catechism 4.005, 4.006, 4.010 Larger Catechism 7.135, 7.137 Confession of 1967 9.12-13 Brief Statement of Faith 10.3

What Is Not Affirmed

- The notion that human nature is basically good and self-redeemable through good effort, discipline, improved environment, etc.
- The notion that man’s defective nature is the result of heredity or environment to such a degree that human beings are not morally responsible for their nature or behavior.
- The notion that God is the author of sin or that sin is part of his original plan to educate and improve humankind.

JESUS CHRIST – INCARNATION OF THE ETERNAL WORD

Affirmation

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

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

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

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

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

Scripture

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

Confessions

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

What Is Not Affirmed

Any doctrine—

- that affirms the deity but not the full humanity of Christ, or the humanity but not Christ’s full deity;
- that asserts that Jesus was an inspired or extraordinary or holy man, but was merely human in nature and not the incarnation in history of the eternal Son of God;
- that attempts to supplement the authoritative revelation of the Old and New Testament scriptures concerning Jesus Christ and proposes a corrected or revised revelation of Jesus;
- that discounts or discredits as untrue or as myth all or portions of the New Testament record concerning Jesus;
- that does not affirm as biblical and true the death of Christ as the central saving act of our Christian faith, or
- that asserts that Jesus is merely one example, however noteworthy, of a divinely approved or divinely enlightened life;
- that asserts that Jesus is one mediator between God and humankind among other religious options or among other spiritual or enlightened teachers or mediators;
- that contends that the Jesus Christ attested by scripture is essentially and significantly different from the historic Jesus of Nazareth;
- that misrepresents Jesus’ mission in terms compatible with pantheism or as a message of human self-fulfillment and divine self-realization, that God is one being with the world or that human

beings are essentially divine, and that all religious truth is harmonious and convergent.

- that detracts from Jesus' supreme authority over every human authority, over the church, and over our individual moral lives.

JESUS CHRIST – HIS ATONING WORK

Affirmation

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

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

Scripture

Matthew 1:21; Romans 3:25; 8:34; 1 Corinthians 1:23-25; 2:2; 15:3; 2 Corinthians 5:19, 21; Galatians 3:13; 6:14; Ephesians 1:19-23; Hebrews 7:25; 9:11-12; 1 Peter 3:18; 1 John 2:2

Confessions

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

What Is Not Affirmed

Any theology—

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

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

SALVATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

Affirmation

Salvation is God's gracious work through Jesus Christ to reclaim humankind and all creation from sin and its consequences and to restore humans to the blessing of fellowship with God. Salvation is a gift of God's grace received by faith. Christ's righteousness and atonement are the sole basis for human salvation. Faith in Christ is the only instrument by which this righteousness is received by individual believers, resulting in their justification.

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

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

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

Scripture

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

Confessions

Second Helvetic Confession 5.107-109, 5.112-113

Heidelberg Catechism 4.021, 4.060

Westminster Confession of Faith 6.080 Brief Statement of Faith 10.4

What is Not Affirmed

Any doctrine—

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

SECTION 2

REFORMED DISTINCTIVES

ELECTION FOR SALVATION AND SERVICE

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

- **To be redeemed,**
- **To be God’s own “treasured possession,” a holy nation and a kingdom of priests,**
- **To live holy and exemplary lives, zealous for good works,**

• **Resulting in praise for the glory of God’s grace. Our salvation is not an accident we stumble into or a destiny we create. It is God’s gracious purpose for our life and it is for God’s glory.**

God has elected us out of grace. God has elected us from eternity. We are elected in Christ, that is—

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

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

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

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

Scripture

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

Confessions

Scots Confession 3.08 Second Helvetic Confession 5.052, 5.053, 5.059-60

What Is Not Affirmed

Any doctrine—

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

COVENANT AND COVENANT LIFE

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

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

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

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

Scripture

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

Confessions

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

What Is Not Affirmed

Any doctrine—

- that promotes a covenant life which is to be lived out in a solitary manner, devoid of community;
- that suggests that covenant life need not be different from the life of the unbeliever in any profound way;
- that would seek to lay the foundation of our covenant life on anything other than or contrary to God's Word.

SACRAMENTS

The church receives from the Lord Jesus Christ two sacred and symbolic actions, called sacraments, which enact and perform (symbolize and seal) the promises of the gospel. These sacraments are Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Baptism is the sign and seal of incorporation into Christ and of the washing away of sin through his sacrifice. Baptism publicly acknowledges that the one baptized is part of the covenant community of faith. The baptism of infants does not save them, nor is it a substitute for faith, but it reminds us that God reaches out to us even before we are able to respond in faith and affirms the reality that baptized children are part of the people of God.

The Lord's Supper, using bread and wine, is the sign and seal of our ongoing communion with the living Christ and of his life continuing to nourish us. Celebrating the Lord's Supper, we give thanks as we remember that Christ lived for us, Christ died for us and Christ will come again.

Both sacraments point to and remind us of the holy sacrifice of Christ for us. The Holy Spirit uses these sacraments—the common signs of water and of bread and wine, combined with the promises in the gospel of eternal life and forgiveness through Christ—to convey grace, salvation, and the real presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, which are received in faith by the believing community in their worship together.

Scripture

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

Confessions

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

What Is Not Affirmed

- That the physical body and blood of Jesus are actually present in the Lord's Supper.
- That there are other sacraments besides the two instituted by the Lord Jesus.
- That other sacraments can be instituted or other elements used.
- That these sacraments are mere symbols or do not involve a supernatural presence of Christ.
- That the sacraments confer grace whether or not they are received in faith.

SANCTIFICATION AND THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

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

Scripture

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

Confessions

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

What Is Not Affirmed

Any doctrine—

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

PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

Every believer, as a disciple of Jesus Christ, is called to participate in his priestly ministry. A priest functions to reconcile people to God. Jesus Christ is the eternal high priest of God’s new covenant, who offered himself as an atoning sin offering on our behalf and who is our eternal advocate before the throne of God. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” All believers are called as disciples to do this ministry of Jesus—to participate in his priestly work of reconciling the world to God by proclaiming the gospel, doing the works of Jesus, and manifesting the reality and power of the kingdom of God in the world. This ministry is not reserved exclusively for ordained clergy and officers, but is the vocational privilege and responsibility of every Christian.

Scripture

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

Confessions

Second Helvetic Confession 5.153
Confession of 1967 9.31, 9.38

MISSION OF THE CHURCH

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

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

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

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

Scripture

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

Confessions

Westminster Confession of Faith 6.058 Confession of 1967 9.06, 9.43, 9.44-9.46.

What Is Not Affirmed

Any witness of the Church—

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

STEWARDSHIP

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

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

Scripture

Psalm 24:1 Romans 12:1; 1 Corinthians 4:7; Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 4:8-11

Confessions

Larger Catechism 7.251 Confession of 1967 9.46 Brief Statement of Faith 10.33, 10.38

SECTION 3

QUESTIONS FOR EXAMINATION

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

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

Scruples

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

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

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

Scripture

The Westminster Catechism says the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, "to be the rule of faith and life." Do you agree with that statement of biblical authority? Do you consider scripture "the rule" of faith and life? In your view, are there other words of God from other sources than Scripture that carry comparable authority?

Explain the authority of Scripture in your own words.

What does the Bible say about its own authority? Which of our confessions best expresses your own doctrine of biblical authority?

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

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

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

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

Trinity

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

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

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

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

Humanity/Sin

A classic Reformed tenet is “total depravity.” What did the Reformers understand by this doctrine? Do you consider it biblical or a pessimistic distortion of real human nature? Do you consider the notion of “sin” unhelpful or obsolete? How would you describe the human situation that requires a savior or salvation? Do you think people are, by nature, basically good, bad, or neither? What is the origin of sin?

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

Do you believe that there are real and eternal issues of judgment at stake in life? Reference Westminster (7.137) and Scots (3.03) on judgment. What do you think about this formulation of sin and judgment? The Brief Statement (10.3) says: “We deserve God’s condemnation.” Do you agree with this assessment of human guilt?

Christology

How would you summarize the core truth about Jesus Christ in the Nicene Creed? According to the Nicene Creed, who is Jesus Christ—and why does it matter? What scriptures support a Nicene Christology? As an issue of theological integrity and conscience, are you in agreement with the Nicene formulation (repeated in all the Reformation confessions, such as Westminster 6.044, and in C’67 9.07-08 and Brief Statement 10.2) that Jesus Christ is the unique incarnation of the eternal Son and “very God from very God”? That is, that he had an eternal divine preexistence before he “came down from heaven” and was incarnate as a human being?

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

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

Do you consider the miracle stories of Jesus’ life—such as healing the sick, raising the dead, casting out demons—to be historically true? Do you believe Jesus really died on the Cross and was bodily resurrected by the power of God as the scriptures describe—or do you consider this a mythical formulation or “faith event” of the early church that had no actual phenomenological basis? How do you understand the phrase from the Apostles’ Creed: “conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary” (2.2)?

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

What does it mean that Jesus Christ is “Lord”? What does Jesus’ Lordship mean in your life? In the lives of others?

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

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

Atonement

What is your understanding of the atoning work of Christ?

Scripture speaks variously of Christ’s atonement—he died for our sins (1Cor 15:3); he who knew no sin became sin on our behalf (2Cor 5:21); he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1Jn 2:2); he took the

punishment for our sins and to satisfy God's righteous anger (Rom 3:25); he suffered to bring us to God (1Pet 3:18); on the cross he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing (Gal 3:13); he gave his life as a ransom (Mark 10:45). What do you understand by these phrases? Are they true or helpful? What do they mean to you personally?

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

How central is the death of Christ to the Christian message? How does the death of Christ accomplish our salvation?

What is your personal relationship to the cross of Christ?

Salvation by Grace through Faith

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

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

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

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

What is the difference between justification and salvation?

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

What do you make of the Bible's many declarations that Christ is the unique and sole Mediator and Savior (such as John 14:6, 1Jn 5:11-12, and Acts 4:12)? Based on the Bible and our Reformed confessions, is it your conviction that everyone is "saved"? Is there salvation apart from Christ?

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

What is the gospel of Jesus Christ?

What is your understanding of heaven and hell?

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

Election

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

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

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

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

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

Sovereignty of God

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

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

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

- 1 What is the Reformed belief regarding the sovereignty of God?
- 2 If a parishioner came to you and said “With all of the evil in the world, God is either weak or just doesn’t care anymore.” How would you respond?
- 3 How does the problem of evil relate to the doctrine of the Sovereignty of God?
- 4 How do you experience God’s sovereignty in your life?

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

Sacraments

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

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

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

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

Mission

How would you summarize the church's mission?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Can you give any examples of the prophetic voice of the church to the world?

What does "the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world" mean?

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

Covenant Life/Stewardship

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

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

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

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

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

Sanctification

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

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

What is holiness? How do we grow in holiness? Is it possible to attain moral and spiritual perfection in our present life?

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

Priesthood of All Believers

- 1 In the Reformed view of the church, who is responsible for doing ministry?
- 2 What does the term "priesthood of all believers" mean to you?
- 3 Scripturally, where does the Reformed tradition get the idea of a "priesthood of all believers"?
- 4 How might the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers determine how you structure the ministry of your new church?

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Theological Challenges

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