

## Some Essential Tenets of the Reformed faith, as Expressed in the Confessions

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While there is no definitive checklist of Reformed doctrines, the following seven theological affirmations are good examples of what is meant by “essential tenets.” This is not intended to be an exhaustive list.

### The Sovereignty of God

The idea that God is the sovereign governor of all creation is a central tenet of Reformed theology. It is emphasized in nearly every confession and catechism in our *Book of Confessions* and is consistent with the character of God as it is borne witness in Scripture. The psalmist testifies again and again that God has oversight over everything that happens in the cosmos, marveling at God’s beauty, majesty, goodness, and grandeur. The Westminster Confession celebrates God’s sovereignty and describes our appropriate response to it:

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. . . . (*Book of Confessions [BOC]*, The Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.112)

The point of confessing that God is sovereign is not to warn us that God gets to do whatever God wants, so we’d better watch our step—although people often get this wrong idea about the divine sovereignty. As Lynn Japinga notes, “the Reformed tradition has been stereotyped as particularly fearful through much of its history.”<sup>44</sup>

There is a *Far Side* cartoon by Gary Larsen that depicts God looking at a computer screen, where a man is standing underneath a piano that is hoisted above his head.

God’s finger hovers over a button on the computer keyboard labeled “smite.”<sup>45</sup> Reformed theology holds, by contrast to this way of thinking, that the sovereign God always acts consistently with who God is. Karl Barth called this “the divine freedom,” arguing that God never exercises God’s power in ways that contradict the truth that God is love.<sup>46</sup>

The sovereign God is triune—not a monolith, but a community (see *BOC*, Confession of Belhar, 10.1). Reveling in the mystery of the Trinity, the Reformed tradition celebrates and contemplates the implications of the truth that the one who is incomprehensibly one is at the same time “distinct in three persons” (*BOC*, Scots Confession, 3.01), with each person being “of the same substance and equal in power and glory” (*BOC*, The Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.051, 6.183). A Brief Statement of Faith testifies, for example, that we know we “belong to God” “in life and in death” by way of God’s particular acts in each of the three particular trinitarian persons (see *BOC*, A Brief Statement of Faith, 11.2–11.4).

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Reflection on the sovereignty of God naturally gives way to consideration of God’s power and its relationship to the power of the creature. We commonly confess that God is omnipotent, or all powerful, but Reformed traditions remind us that this does not mean God has all the power and we have none. God, then, is not a God of “sheer power” but a God who shares power with us.<sup>47</sup> God does this by entering into powerlessness with us in the person of Jesus Christ (see Philippians 2) and exalting us, with him, to the life of the triune God. In Question 32, the Heidelberg Catechism recognizes that God’s sharing of power with us shapes Christian life:

### **Q: But why are you called a Christian?**

A: Because by faith I am a member of Christ and so I share in his anointing. I am anointed to confess his name, to present myself to him as a living sacrifice of thanks, to strive with a free conscience against sin and the devil in this life, and afterward to reign with Christ over all creation for eternity (*BOC*, The Heidelberg Catechism, 4.032).

### **The Centrality of Jesus Christ**

Another tenet of Reformed theology is that Jesus Christ stands at the center of all things. As the one who is fully divine as well as fully human, Jesus Christ participates in the divine triune life. He is "... eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light ..." (*BOC*, Nicene Creed, 1.2; cf. Apostles' Creed, 2.2). He, with the Father, sends the Holy Spirit to comfort and empower us (*BOC*, Nicene, 1.3). As the one who is fully human as well as fully divine, Jesus Christ participates in creaturely existence, showing us who God created us to be and what God is redeeming us for.

The confessions hold that there is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ, and that salvation in Jesus Christ is more than just "fire insurance"—it includes living with a perception "of our being in him" that nurtures abundant life and compels grateful service. Calvin emphasizes that Christ saves us as the "prophet" who shows us the way of God, as the "priest" who sacrifices his life for us, and as the "king" (or "victor") who includes us as full participants in God's redemptive work (cf. *BOC*, The Shorter Catechism 7.023).<sup>48</sup>

Jesus Christ also stands at the center of all our interpretive and discerning work.

... When controversy arises about the right understanding of any passage or sentence of Scripture, or for the reformation of any abuse within the Kirk of God, we ought not so much to ask what [our forebears] have said or done before us, as what the Holy Ghost uniformly speaks within the body of the Scriptures and what Christ Jesus himself did and commanded. ... (*BOC*, The Scots Confession, 3.18)

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. (*BOC*, The Theological Declaration of Barmen, 8.11)

When we call this one who stands at the center "Lord," the Reformed tradition argues, we are able to identify the "lordless powers" of the world and take a prophetic stand against them. As Jacqueline Grant writes, "to claim Jesus as Lord is to say the white slaveholder isn't."<sup>49</sup>

### **The Movement of the Holy Spirit**

An additional tenet of Christian faith in the Reformed tradition is the conviction that the Holy Spirit lives and moves in the lives of individuals, communities, and the world. The Holy Spirit works in spheres both private and public; the Spirit is at once both reassuringly reliable and breath-takingly surprising.

The Heidelberg Catechism argues that the Holy Spirit works in the lives of believers and believing communities by creating "... wholehearted trust ... by the gospel" (*BOC*, Heidelberg, 4.021). Calvin insists, along the same lines, that it is "through the Holy Spirit" that Christian believers have "firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward them."<sup>50</sup> In the eucharistic feast, the Spirit joins believers to the body and blood of Christ which is now in heaven (*BOC*, The Scots Confession, 3.21).

The Brief Statement of Faith also emphasizes that the Holy Spirit is not confined to working within the visible church but is “everywhere the giver and renewer of life” (*BOC*, 11.4, line 53). This means Christian believers need constantly to be on the lookout for what the Spirit is up to and how they can participate in the work of God. One professor was known to exclaim, recognizing the challenge of this, that trying to ascertain the movement of the Spirit “is like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall!” Thankfully, the Spirit assists us with our perception, inspiring “the prophets and apostles” (*BOC*, 11.4, line 59) and giving believers “courage ... to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace” (*BOC*, 11.4, lines 66, 71).

### **The Gift of Creation**

A tenet of Reformed theology, and one that is often overlooked, is that creation is “all good” because the sovereign God who made it out of nothing is supremely good. There are many important implications of this for our lives of faith. First, the fact that we human beings are made as part of God’s good creation means that we, too, were made wholly “good.” A saying on a child’s t-shirt makes this point nicely (albeit with poor grammar!): “God made me, and God don’t make no junk!”

Second, the fact that we were made good by God means sin is a big problem. It violates God’s creative intention, which is why Calvin calls it an “aberration.”<sup>51</sup> When we sin, we are turning not only away from God, but away from those whom God created us to be.

Third, creation is a gift that is to be enjoyed and cherished. The Second Helvetic puts it this way: “everything that God had made was very good, and was made for the profit and use of [humanity]” (*BOC*, The Second Helvetic Confession, 5.032).

Serene Jones argues, along these lines, that when we contemplate the beauty of the doctrine of creation, it begins to form us as people, “shaping our imaginations and desires.”<sup>52</sup>

Fourth, Calvin helps us remember that this does not mean we, as human creatures, are authorized by God to hoard, damage, or use up God’s gift. He understands the freedom of the Christian to entail “using God’s gifts for God’s purposes,”<sup>53</sup> not for just anything that strikes our fancy. A Brief Statement of Faith suggests that this “planet” has been “entrusted to our care” (*BOC*, 11.3, line 38). Enjoying it requires caring for it.

### **The Devastation of Sin**

A central tenet of the Reformed faith is that our “[rebelliousness] against God” and our “[hiding] from our Creator” has a devastating impact on us and our world (*BOC*, A Brief Statement of Faith, 11.3). “The Fall brought upon [humanity] the loss of communion with God” (*BOC*, The Larger Catechism, 7.137).

There is absolutely nothing we can do, in and of our own strength, to overcome or overwhelm sin and its consequences. We in ourselves are “so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil” (*BOC*, The Heidelberg Catechism, 4.008).

“By [humanity’s] transgression, generally known as original sin, the image of God was utterly defaced in [humanity], and he and his children became by nature hostile to God, slaves to Satan, and servants to sin” (*BOC*, The Scots Confession, 3.03).

There is an old joke about someone who asked directions and was given the answer: “You can’t get there from here.” The doctrine of “total depravity” is the teaching that we cannot get from our broken condition to God—which is why God entered into our broken condition to claim us.

## The Promise of Redemption

Reformed theology insists God will keep God's promise to redeem all of creation. This central tenet is built on the others—that the sovereign God governs all things; that the event of Jesus Christ (including his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and Second Coming) reorients and transforms everything; and that the Holy Spirit's renewing work is ongoing and pervasive.

“Already God's reign is present as a ferment in the world, stirring hope in [people] and preparing the world to receive its ultimate judgment and redemption” (*BOC*, The Confession of 1967, 9.55).

Redemption includes, according to the confessions, the forgiveness of sins, the intercession of Christ on our behalf, knowledge of the “mysteries of salvation,” the working of the Spirit who assists the redeemed in believing and obeying, and even the “overcoming ...[of] enemies by [God's] almighty power and wisdom” (*BOC*, The Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.050). It also looks ahead to the day when we will “behold the face of God in light and glory” and experience “the full redemption of [our] bodies” (*BOC*, The Larger Catechism, 7.196).

A theology student once shared in class, the feeling that “all of me is broken.” The promise to that seminarian—and to each and all of us—is that our healing will be whole and entire, body and soul (*BOC*, The Heidelberg Catechism, 4.026).

## The Calling of the Church

Finally, an additional tenet of the Reformed tradition is that we, as members of Christ's body, have particular calling in the world.

“Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him” (*BOC*, The Heidelberg Catechism, 4.001).

To discern our calling, we look to Christ:

The life, death, resurrection, and promised coming of Jesus Christ has set the pattern for the church's mission. ... His service to [human beings] commits the church to work for every form of human well-being (*BOC*, The Confession of 1967, 9.34).

The particular tasks to which we are called might range from taking care of our own children and households, to “prayers, fasting and almsgiving” (*BOC*,

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The Second Helvetic Confession, 5.250), to “delivering the message of the free grace of God to all people in Christ's stead” (*BOC*, The Theological Declaration of Barmen, 8.26).

Any work engaged in faithful obedience is “holy and truly good” (*BOC*, Second Helvetic, 5.250), but provisional in the sense that redemption will not be complete until Christ's Second Coming. The church lives and acts, therefore, “even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth” (*BOC*, A Brief Statement of Faith, 11.4, Lines 75–76).

## Notes

43 The *Book of Confessions*, The Scots Confession (1560) argues that “the Holy Ghost” does not “permit” women to preach or baptize (3.22) while A Brief Statement of Faith (1983) holds that the Holy Spirit “calls women and men to all ministries of the Church” (11.4).

44 Lynn Japinga, “Fear in the Reformed Tradition,” *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*. Eds. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones. Nashville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

45 This comic strip can be viewed at <https://thebarkingfox.com/tag/smite-button/>. (Last Accessed 7.29.19).

46 See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, §28.

47 See Daniel L. Migliore, *The Power of God and the gods of Power*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

48 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Editor John T. McNeill. Louisville: Westminster Press, 1960, I.15.

49 Jacqueline Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, Volume 64, American Academy of Religion Academy Series (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

50 Calvin, *Institutes* III.2.7.

51 Calvin, *Institutes* II.1.10.

52 Serene Jones, “Glorious Creation, Beautiful Law,” in Pauw and Jones, 24.

53 *Institutes* III.19.1.

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