

“In the sixteenth century, many believers protested against the false teachings in the church and returned to the true gospel under the leadership of Reformers such as Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin. The term ‘Reformed’ was associated primarily with Calvin’s work in the church of Geneva, but all Protestant Reformers held certain cardinal views in common.” –Richard Pratt

## ***What Does It Mean to Be “Reformed?”***

*(Excerpted from Christ Covenant OPC Statement of Belief and Practice)*

### **1. It means to affirm the great “*sola*’s” (Latin for “only”) of the Reformation.**

- *Sola Scriptura*...Scripture alone
- *Sola fide*...faith alone
- *Sola gratia*...grace alone
- *Solus Christus*...Christ alone
- *Soli Deo gloria*...to the glory of God alone

### **2. It means to affirm and promote a profoundly high view of the sovereignty of God.**

- It rejects the extremes of Deism and Fatalism and sees God as actively involved in His creation, governing and overseeing *all* the affairs of men.  
Cf. Psalm 115:3; Job 34:14-15; 37:6-13; Daniel 4:35

### **3. It means to affirm the doctrines of grace... to see God as the author of salvation from beginning to and end.**

- The acrostic *TULIP* is the most familiar way of delineating the doctrines of grace.  
*T*otal depravity  
*U*nconditional election  
*L*imited atonement  
*I*rrresistible grace  
*P*erseverance of the saints

While this acrostic is well known, there are more helpful means of defining and articulating what it is we mean by the “doctrines of grace.” A brief summary statement of each of these five doctrines follows.

1. By “Total Depravity” what we are to understand is that man is utterly lacking in his ability to (in and of himself) respond to the Good News of salvation thru Christ alone. That is why some describe this first doctrine as “total inability.” It does not mean that human beings are as wicked or evil as they could possibly be; it simply says to us that every faculty of man’s being as been horribly affected and “deadened” by sin in the fall of Adam. The whole man—his mind, his heart, and, especially, his will—has been so affected by the fall that he is in a state of utter and complete inability to comply with God’s commandments.

Cf. Romans 1:18-32; 3:10-18; 5:12-19; Ephesians 2:1-3; Colossians 2:13

2. “Unconditional Election” (a doctrine often misunderstood and misrepresented) teaches us that a gracious and loving God has “out of mere grace, according to the sovereign good pleasure of His own will, chosen from the whole human race...a certain number of persons to redemption in Christ... Those chosen were neither better nor more deserving than the others...” (Canons of Dort, First Main Point of Doctrine, Article 7). God’s election unto salvation is unconditional in that it is not predicated on anything we do (not even our “choosing”) or anything we are. It finds

its basis in a sovereign God's mere good pleasure. When properly understood, this glorious doctrine strikes a death blow to all human pride as well as the pervasive sense of self-sufficiency characteristic of mankind.

Cf. Jn. 15:16; Acts 13:48; Rom. 8:29-30; 9:10-13, 16; Eph. 1:4-5, 11; 2Thes. 2:13; 2Tim.1:9

3. The third doctrine of grace, "Limited Atonement", while fitting nicely into the *TULIP* acrostic, is less than helpful because of its "limitations." If not properly explained, it can easily lead one to conclude that God is limited, that He can only save some. Thus, terms like "particular redemption" or "efficacious atonement" are better descriptions of what this doctrine actually entails. Very simply, limited atonement or particular redemption teaches us that Christ's atonement, the redemptive nature of His death on the Cross, was for a particular people. It was for the elect of God and only for the elect. It was "limited" in that sense and in no other.

Cf. Isa.53:11; Matt.20:28; Jn.6:37-39; Heb.9:28

4. "Irresistible Grace" has been referred to by some as "effectual call" or "efficacious grace, that is, it effects or accomplishes God's desired end. It is the doctrine that teaches us that God, through the agency of regeneration, replaces our heart of stone with a heart of flesh, thus causing the elect of God to be perfectly willing and desirous of receiving Christ unto salvation.

Irresistible grace does not suggest either raw determinism or God forcing us to believe in Him against our will. Rather, this doctrine teaches us that salvation is all of grace, the grace of God applied to unregenerate men and women resulting in a change of their "want to." As God gives this grace to sinners, they willingly choose to believe and receive (Jn 1:12). However, without the application of this grace, none would choose to believe.

Cf. Jn.1:12-13; 5:25; 6:45; Acts 16:14; Rom.3:21-26

5. The final doctrine of grace (Perseverance of the Saints) is one of the most precious and freeing truths in all of Scripture. It gives assurance to the child of God that God is indeed able to save from first to last, from beginning to end. C. H. Spurgeon, in refuting those who argued that one can never be absolutely sure of his or her final destination, once said, "I grant that my atonement, or bridge to heaven is more narrow than yours. However, yours only goes half way across the chasm and mine goes all the way. In your scheme, the sinner must furnish the other half."

Perseverance of the Saints (sometimes called "preservation" of the saints) teaches us that the child of God will persevere, he will be preserved in his faith because it is God who has begun that good work and *He* will bring it completion (Philip. 1:6). Once again, salvation is seen to be entirely of God, from first to last.

Cf. Ps.37:28; Isa. 45:17; Matt.10:22; Jn.6:37-40; 10:27-30; 17:9-18; Heb.7:25; 1Jn.2:19, 25

#### **4. It means to be creedal...to affirm the great creeds of the historic, orthodox Church.**

The history of God's people is replete with "creeds" (statements of belief) from the earliest of times. The *Shema* of Israel as recorded in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 is but one O.T. example. 1 Timothy 3:16 is a prime illustration of a N.T. creedal affirmation. Romans 10:9-10 underscores the importance of creedal and confessional statements. By affirming the great creeds of our faith we are effectively joining the venerable communion of saints, ritually confessing our solidarity with the Church of all ages.

- The Apostles' Creed
- The Nicene Creed
- The Chalcedonian Creed

#### **5. It means to be confessional...to affirm one or more of the great confessions of the historic, orthodox Church.**

While it is undeniably true that the Bible is *entirely* sufficient for the whole of life, we must, none-the-less, acknowledge that problems arise when people begin to discuss what they believe is or is not included in the teaching of Scripture. Thus, it is simply not enough to say, "I believe in the Bible." Confessions of faith, catechisms, and the like give definition to our understanding of what the Scriptures teach. A confessional standard is helpful in at least the following ways:

1. A confession allows us to express our faith with precision. We are not at the mercy or the vagaries of subjective and individualized readings of the Bible.
2. A confession allows us to defend a *particular* faith. It is very hard to defend a faith that is not agreed upon beforehand.
3. A confession allows us to establish an objective basis for doctrinal unity.
4. A confession organizes and systematizes what will and will not be taught to our children.
5. A confession allows us to standardize what will be the doctrinal basis for our decisions. Without this safeguard every individual's private view of Scripture becomes the legitimate source for Christian behavior. The Bible teaches otherwise (2 Peter 1:20-21).
6. A confession serves to act as a yardstick by which to measure the leaders for the Church. Churches without a confessional standard must rely on an intuitive process instead of an objective format when selecting Pastors, Elders and Deacons. Churches without a confessional standard often have later found themselves regrettably surprised by what their leaders really believed. A confession of faith informs the Church in advance as to what its leaders will teach.

- The Westminster Standards
  - The Westminster Confession of Faith
  - The Westminster Longer Catechism
  - The Westminster Shorter Catechism
- The Three Forms of Unity
  - The Belgic Confession of Faith
  - The Heidelberg Catechism
  - The Canons of Dort
- The London Baptist Confession of Faith

**6. It means to be covenantal...to affirm the great covenants of Scripture and see those covenants as the means by which God interacts with and accomplishes His purposes in His creation, with mankind.**

The Scriptures contain numerous examples of God "covenanting" with man, establishing and ordaining a variety of covenants. Having said that, the Reformed tradition perceives all of these covenants as falling under three broad covenants. They are:

- The Covenant of Redemption

The Covenant of Redemption is that pre-Creation "agreement among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in which the Son agreed to become a man, be our representative, obey the demands of the covenant of works on our behalf, and pay the penalty for sin, which we deserved."

Cf. John 3:16; Romans 5:18-19; Galatians 4:4; Hebrews 2:14-18; John 14:16-17, 26; Acts 2:33

- The Covenant of Works

The Covenant of Works is that pre-Fall agreement between the Lord God and Adam in which Adam was promised blessing and life upon obedience to the terms of the covenant and cursing and death should he disobey the terms of the covenant. “The requirements of the (covenantal) relationship are clearly defined in the commands that God gave to Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:28-30; cf. 2:15) and in the direct command to Adam, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die’ (Gen. 2:16-17).” The Covenant of Works ceased to be in affect after the Fall.

Cf. Hosea 6:7

- The Covenant of Grace

The Covenant of Grace is that covenant by which a gracious and loving God works out the amazing plan of redemption in which sinful and rebellious people may once again be restored to communion and fellowship with Him. This covenant is made possible only through the passive and active obedience of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is entitled a “covenant of grace” because it is predicated entirely on grace—that is, God’s unmerited favor toward those whom He redeems [and their children].

Cf. Genesis 17:7; Jeremiah 31:33; 32:38-40; 2 Corinthians 6:16; 1 Peter 2:9-10

**7. It means to take seriously The Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20...to affirm the primacy of mission...to understand that the Church has a mission.**

**8. It means to have a distinctly Christian worldview that permeates all of life.**

- Some elements of a Christian worldview

- An affirmation of the sovereignty of God
- An affirmation of the sufficiency and relevance of God’s Word for all of life
- An affirmation of the necessity of absolutes
- An eternal rather than merely a temporal perspective
- The rightful division of authority (spheres of authority)
- The sanctity of life
- The priority of vocation/calling

- Questions to help develop a distinctly Christian worldview

1. Why is there something rather than nothing?
2. How do you explain human nature?
3. What happens to a person at death?
4. How do you determine what is right and what is wrong?
5. How do you know what you know?
6. What is the meaning of history?

“Friday was Reformation Day; the 491st anniversary of the day Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. Little did Father Martin comprehend what was to come of it. An Augustinian monk then priest who completed his doctorate in theology in 1513, he was Professor of Biblical Theology at the newly established Wittenberg University. For the next four years, preparing lectures on the Psalms, Romans and Galatians, he found a profound change taking place within him. In a world where Christ was very distant, and a church that believed Christ’s salvation was only mediated by and through it, based on merit, Luther was consumed with his own guilt. When the church began selling Christ’s forgiveness through indulgences, Luther became even more troubled. As he studied and lectured on scripture, Luther became ever more convinced that Christ’s salvation was received by grace alone, through faith alone as it is revealed in scripture alone. Solo gratia, solo fides, sola scriptura, soon became his canon. It would ultimately be the battle cry and norm for the entire Reformation. But on that October 31, 1517, Father Martin was simply doing what academics did all the time: posting a list of 95 things he had come to believe could not be supported by scripture, inviting a scholarly debate. The last thing he had in mind was a division within the church; he was simply trying to reform the church from within. Three years later, Luther was tried and condemned as a heretic, named an outlaw, and condemned to be burned at the stake. But the Reformation was now in full bloom.

“God’s Spirit had been blowing not only in Father Martin’s heart, but in the hearts of other priests, Huldreich Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger in Zurich, Martin Bucer in Strausburg, William Farel in Geneva, Tyndale in England, John Knox in Scotland, and a generation later, John Calvin in Paris. These and others, who were thoroughly versed in scripture, like Luther, had passed through their own inward struggles to an unwavering assurance of the biblical truths and saving faith of grace alone, through faith alone as revealed in scripture alone. In reading scripture they were not simply taking in the words of authors named Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Peter or Paul. In reading their words, the Spirit of God was engaging them in such a way that they were hearing the living voice of the Savior, the Viva Vox Christi, and they were being transformed.

“Here is one of the foundational things it means to be reformed. As scripture is read and proclaimed we listen for the Word of God, and when listening, by God’s Spirit, hear the voice of the living Christ. He calls us to follow, challenges us to deeper faith and faithfulness, convicts us of those things that have the power to destroy us, creates repentance and restores in us those things that give life. Christ’s voice comforts us with the assurance that we belong to him, and calls us into his future as Lord, not simply of our own lives, but Lord of all. This is what we mean when we say, ‘Listen for the Word of God,’ before a reading; listen for the voice of the Living Christ among us.

“So too, for that Word rightly preached; our prayer for illumination, that pleads for God’s Spirit to open our hearts and minds to his Word is as applicable to the sermon as to the reading of scripture. Paul writes to the Thessalonians, ‘we constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is also at work in you believers.’ Bullinger, Luther’s Swiss contemporary and colleague of Calvin, wrote, in what is now one of the Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), ‘The preaching of the Word of God, is the Word of God.’ This is who we are to be listening for in worship, whether in scripture, sermon, hymn, anthem or creed.

“So too for sacraments, Christ’s gifts to us for our birth and nurture into our vocations as his people; they are, as St. Augustine said, ‘Medicine for our mortality.’ As Christ is present in the Word, so Christ is present in water, bread and wine. These are not ceremonies of dedication or remembrance. They are acts of Christ himself who is present in them and at work through them. He is their author, he is their content, and he is the one working in and through them. What scripture and the sermon proclaim, the sacraments bring forth and seal in our lives – Christ himself – making us bearers of his life, a community of priests.

“You see, the reformers did not do away with priesthood – they expanded and transformed it to include all the baptized. In baptism you and I are ordained priests, who represent and mediate God’s presence, who become sacraments of Christ, conduits through whom Christ becomes present to others. As this year’s stewardship brochure reminds us, we are all ‘faces of grace.’ When we greet one another in worship with ‘the peace of Christ be with you,’ we are not simply making wishes or hoping good things for one another. We are releasing the power of Christ within us and giving it to each other. That too is one of our priestly ministries. When we say ‘God bless you,’ we are not simply muttering polite sentiment. We are releasing the power of God that resides in us by God’s Spirit, and mediating it to another in blessing. This too is part of what it means to be reformed.”

*–The Rev. Dr. Fred R. Anderson, Pastor, Copyright 2008*