



THE Reformed Tradition:

EXPLORING THE FOUNDATIONS OF FAITH

Before You Begin

This will be a brief overview of the stream of Christianity known as the Reformed tradition. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and the Christian Reformed Church are among those considered to be churches in the Reformed tradition.

Readers who are not Presbyterian may find this topic to be “too Presbyterian.” We encourage you to find out more about your own faith tradition.

Background Information

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is part of the Reformed tradition, which, like most Christian traditions, is ancient. It began at the time of Abraham and Sarah and was Jewish for about two thousand years before moving into the formation of the Christian church. As Christianity grew and evolved, two distinct expressions of Christianity emerged, and the Eastern Orthodox expression officially split with the Roman Catholic expression in the 11th century. Those of the Reformed tradition diverged from the Roman Catholic branch at the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century.

Martin Luther of Germany precipitated the Protestant Reformation in 1517. Soon Huldrych Zwingli was leading the Reformation in Switzerland; there were important theological differences between Zwingli and Luther. As the Reformation progressed, the term “Reformed” became attached to the Swiss Reformation because of its insistence on

References

Refer to “Small Groups 101” in The Creating WomanSpace section for tips on leading a small group.

Refer to the “Faith in Action” sections of Remembering Sacredness for tips on incorporating spiritual practices into your group or individual work with this topic.

Refer to the flyer with excerpts from *Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture* for suggestions on how to approach Bible study.

Refer to the “Honest Questioning and Dialogue” section of the Introduction for reminders about creating safe space for sharing and the intersection of denominational social witness with the integrity of the individual conscience.



reforming the church strictly through the application of biblical principles to the life of the church. John Calvin, who came after Zwingli and is one of the Swiss Reformers, wrote the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which set forth the tenets of the Reformed tradition.

John Knox studied with Calvin in Geneva and returned home the hero of the Scottish Reformation. As the Church of Scotland came into existence, influenced by Calvin's theology and polity, it developed Presbyterianism.

"The Presbyterian church is a representative democracy governed by elders elected from and by the congregation." (*About Being Presbyterian*, p. 3)

Reformers made their way to the American colonies beginning in the 1600s. Some church historians estimate that by 1776 three-fourths of the population of the soon-to-become United States were of the Reformed tradition. The Reformed tradition was influential in the development of the United States and its government. In the 19th century, Reformed missionaries from North America spread across the globe. Today, Presbyterian and Reformed churches can be found on six continents.

How Faith Speaks

The *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) gives us a summary of the themes of the Reformed tradition from the perspective of the PC(USA).

"Central to this tradition is the affirmation of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love. Related to this central affirmation of God's sovereignty are other great themes of the Reformed tradition:

1. The election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation;
2. Covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God;
3. A faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God's creation;
4. The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God" (G-2.0500).

The majesty, holiness, and providence of God, who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love.

Calvin's central, unifying theme, and perhaps the foundation of Reformed theology, is that in every moment of our lives we are in the presence of the living God: "In life and in death we belong to God" (From A Brief Statement of Faith (10:1, line 1). We are never beyond God's purview and never beyond God's grace.

The election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation.

According to the Reformed tradition, who is saved and who is not is up to God and God alone. Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. As defined in the *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, salvation is understood to be "God's activities in bringing humans into right relationship with God and with one another through Jesus Christ." Salvation is purely



Protestant Slogans

sola gratia (Lat. “by grace alone”). A slogan of the Protestant Reformation indicating that the basis for Christian salvation is solely the grace of God and not any human achievement. It is God’s initiative and action which is the agent of salvation.

sola fide (Lat. “by faith alone”). A slogan of the Protestant Reformation used by Martin Luther (1483–1546) on the basis of Rom. 3:28 to indicate that justification of the sinner (salvation) comes only to those who have faith and is not achieved through any “good works.”

sola scriptura (Lat. “Scripture alone”). A slogan of the Protestant Reformation indicating that the church’s authority is only the Holy Scriptures and not ecclesiastical traditions or human opinions. This was called the “formal principle” of the Reformation, or the “Scripture principle.”

Definitions are from the *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, by Donald K. McKim. Westminster John Knox Press, 1996. Used by permission.

of God’s choosing and has nothing to do with our “good works,” but rather with the faith God gives us. Even so, God elects us for service as well as for salvation. We may be called by God to a specific profession, to a particular act of service, or more generally to a way of life. The way one lives one’s life as a disciple of Jesus can be a service of God and others.

Covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God.

The Reformed tradition understands that God invites us to live in covenant. Through the ages we have broken the covenant; we have pretended that

God wasn’t there; we have shirked our responsibilities. Because we are in covenant with God, we are in covenant with one another. As Jesus summed it up, the first and greatest commandment is “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:30–31). The polity (form of government) of churches in the Reformed tradition keeps congregations and governing bodies in covenant with one another, interrelating and working together, each for the good of the other, and for the good of the whole.

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.”

Exodus 20:2–3

A faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God’s creation.

The Reformed tradition recognizes that “going for show,” instead of simplicity, honesty and stewardship, usually leads us to a misuse of the gifts of God’s

“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

Jeremiah 31:33



For Journaling or Conversation

What does it mean to you that “in life and in death” you “belong to God”? How do you understand the “sovereignty” of God?

“**election:** God’s choosing of a people to enjoy the benefits of salvation and to carry out God’s purposes in the world (1 Thess. 1:4, 2 Peter 1:10).”

“**salvation by grace:** The theological view, emphasized in Protestantism, that Christian salvation comes through God’s free mercy and love for sinners. It is given as God’s free gift of grace—without any merit or worthiness on the part of the individual who receives it.”

Definitions are from the *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, by Donald K. McKim. Westminster John Knox Press, 1996. Used by permission.

creation. In the face of burgeoning population and the depletion of the earth’s resources, we people of faith, particularly in North America, must question our ostentatious lifestyles and hoggish consumption of much more than our fair share of the earth’s goodness.

The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God.

Reformed theology resists the urge to control God (as if we could) or to box God in. Any attempt to tame God, to define God according to humanity’s finite knowledge and desires, is idolatry and must be repudiated. If we claim to know God completely, if we claim that our understanding of God is the right one and all others are wrong, then we have created our own idol. Likewise, if we worship money, or if we worship fear—being afraid to speak out, for example—then working for justice will not be on our agenda. If we worship God, then we must work to bring about justice in the world.

But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator. Ignoring God’s commandments, we violate the image of God in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care. We deserve God’s condemnation. Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation. In everlasting love, the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people to bless all families of the earth.

From A Brief Statement of Faith 10:3, lines 33-43, *The Book of Confessions*.

For Journaling or Conversation

What is your understanding of salvation? grace? faith? good works?

What difference does it make if “good works” are the ticket to salvation or not? What difference does it make if “faith” is the ticket to salvation or not?



In adherence to this theme, the Reformed tradition places a lot of responsibility on the shoulders of government officials. They should be obeyed, and they should rule justly and in accordance with God's will. There are times, however, when—in order to obey God—ordinary citizens have to stand against their government. In this vein, Calvin said, “But in that obedience which we have shown to be due the authority of rulers, we are always to make this exception, indeed, to observe it as primary, that such obedience is never to lead us away from obedience to [God], to whose will the desires of all kings ought to be subject, to whose decrees all their commands ought to yield, to whose majesty their scepters ought to be submitted” (Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 1520).

For Journaling or Conversation

What do you suppose the covenant means to God?

Recall instances in the Bible where God made or renewed the covenant. Why do you think God keeps renewing the covenant even though people don't seem to be able to stick to it?

How do you understand “stewardship”? In what ways are you a good steward? In what ways could you be a better steward?

How might Christians in the Reformed tradition maintain personal convictions while resisting the temptation to claim complete knowledge of God?

What does it mean for you to seek justice?

What does it mean for you to live in obedience to God?

What situations might compel you to engage in civil disobedience?

Faith In Action

Choose among these suggested activities.

1. Discuss these questions.

What parts of the history and themes of the Reformed tradition resonate with you?

What parts challenge you?

Reformed denominations value working cooperatively with other denominations and other faiths. How do interdenominational and interfaith dialogues help us learn more about God? When you are involved in an interdenominational or interfaith conversation, why is it helpful for you to know your own faith tradition and beliefs?

2. Focus on the three slogans of the Protestant Reformation: *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *sola Scriptura*. What further questions do you have about these three themes? How do they compare with other Christian themes of which you are aware?

3. Write a prayer or litany based on one of the major themes of the Reformed tradition.

4. Invite guests from different traditions to speak to your group about the major tenets of their traditions.



For Further Study

The Book of Confessions, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I. Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2007.

Book of Order, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II. Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2011.

Chapman, William E. *History and Theology in the Book of Order: Blood on Every Page.* Louisville: Witherspoon Press, 1999.

McKim, Donald K. *Presbyterian Beliefs: A Brief Introduction.* Louisville: Geneva Press, 2003.

Plunkett, Stephen W. *This We Believe: Eight Truths Presbyterians Affirm.* Louisville: Geneva Press, 2002.

The Presbyterian Handbook. Louisville: Geneva Press, 2006.

Weeks, Louis B. *To Be a Presbyterian,* Rev. ed. Louisville: Geneva Press, 2010

References

About Being Presbyterian: A Guide to More Effective Church Membership. South Deerfield, MA: Channing L. Bete Co., 1995.

The Book of Confessions, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I. Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2007.

Book of Order, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II. Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2011.

Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion.* Vol. 21, of the Library of Christian Classics, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960.

Leith, John H. *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition.* Rev. ed. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981.

McKim, Donald K. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.

National Network of Presbyterian College Women

Young Women's Leadership Development



General Assembly Mission Council
100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202