



## First United Church of Oak Park

### **Reformed and Always Being Reformed**

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John, Matthew, Ephesians, 2 Timothy, 1 Thessalonians,  
Colossians, Genesis, Galatians

July 25, 2021

I don't know if it's the preparations I did for my theology ordination exam recently, all the time I'm spending in the Presbyterian world serving on three different entities of the Chicago Presbytery, or the recent discernment and conversations we have had around making changes to our purpose statement and covenant (it's probably a combination of all of the above), but at the forefront of my mind have been thoughts about theology, the Reformed tradition, and how these play into my identity as a Christian, and as a Presbyterian specifically.

I've said it before, but I'll say it again, having been born and raised in the Presbyterian Church made me a terrible Presbyterian. What I mean to say is, because I was brought up Presbyterian, everything about it was the norm to me. I never really learned what it was that made someone Presbyterian, what it was about the way we did church that made it different from other churches and denominations. I wasn't aware of the history of the church, the relationships between Christian denominations, or the numerous, differing theologies and tenets of faith encompassed in Christianity. And, it wasn't until much later in life that I even heard the term "Reformed Tradition."

Reformed and Always Being Reformed. This is a regularly used value statement of the "Reformed Tradition," but what is the Reformed tradition, what does it mean to identify as a part of it?

I appreciate your patience with me today as I am doing things somewhat out of order (how very un-Presbyterian of me), but for our Scripture today, I will be combining Scripture passages with tenets of the Reformed tradition.

In the words of the book of Revelation, *"Let anyone who has an ear to hear, listen to what the Spirit is saying..."*

**Tenet: We believe** in the mystery of a triune God — one God in three persons who scripture shows is creator, reconciler, and sustainer.

**Scripture:** *“<sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being... <sup>14</sup>And the Word became flesh and lived among us...” (John 1:1-3, 14a)*

*“<sup>16</sup>And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.” (Matthew 3:16)*

**Tenet: We believe** we are not alone because we believe in the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us.

**Scripture:** *“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” (Matthew 1:23)*

**Tenet: We believe** in justification by grace through faith, that God’s love in Jesus Christ saves us and draws us back to God.

**Scripture:** *“<sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — <sup>9</sup>not the result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup>For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” (Ephesians 2:8-10)*

**Tenet: We believe** in the authority of Scripture, which lies at the center of Christian faith. It is the lens through which we know God, who we are, and how we must live.

**Scripture:** *“<sup>14</sup>...continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, <sup>15</sup>and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup>All scripture is inspired by God...” (2 Timothy 3:14-16a)*

*“<sup>13</sup>...we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God...” (1 Thessalonians 2:13)*

**Tenet: We believe** in the sovereignty of God, that God and God alone is the source and power of all that exists.

**Scripture:** *“<sup>16</sup> for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”* **(Colossians 1:16-17)**

**Tenet: We believe** in a priesthood of all believers and God’s covenant with chosen people, that God called ordinary people and entrusted them to follow God’s guidance in spreading God’s love and living holy lives. We are all chosen.

**Scripture:** *“<sup>2</sup> We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly <sup>3</sup> remembering before our God your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you,”* **(1 Thessalonians 1:2-4)**

**Tenet: We believe** we are called to be faithful stewards of creation, responsible for caring for each other and all of creation.

**Scripture:** *“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’”* **(Genesis 1:26)**

**Tenet: We believe** in working toward the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the word of God.

**Scripture:** *“<sup>13</sup> For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become servants of one another. <sup>14</sup> For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”* **(Galatians 5:13-14)**

Before I continue, would you please join me in a posture of prayer?

Sovereign, loving, triune God, may the words of my mouth, the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In order to help put the “Reformed Tradition” into context, I invite you to consider the Christian religion as a family tree. In which case, Judaism would be the roots of the tree. The part of the trunk closest to the ground and the roots would be Jesus; then, one holy-catholic-apostolic church; after that, the great schism (which created limbs

branching off the trunk); and then Martin Luther and the start of the Reformation (which created more branches). The branches of the Christian family tree are numerous and include Lutheranism, Radical Reformers, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Reformed and more. And off each of those branches are even more branches! The Presbyterian and Church of Christ denominations, the two denominations that joined together to form First United, can be found along the Reformed branch.

So, what is the Reformed tradition?

Well, “Reformed” is not a denomination, it’s a theological perspective, a lens or theory through which to think about God, faith, and religious beliefs. However, just because you adopt, use, or engage with a theological perspective, doesn’t mean that is the only one you will ever consider, or that *real* Christians must prescribe to a certain theology and all others are false. There is no monopoly on truth when it comes to our thinking about God and religious beliefs. In fact, the word reformed itself excludes narrowness and one-sidedness. There is no such thing as *the* Reformed perspective or position.

Although John Calvin is often referred to as “the father of the Reformed tradition,” the Reformed family has many children (aka theologians), and not all of them agree with Calvin 100%. But all of them, and all of us are encouraged, really expected, to continue considering the theologies, confessions and creeds that came before, and challenge them, question them for ourselves, in our context.

Because according to Reformed Churches, there always has been and always will be the right and responsibility to question any individual’s, any denomination’s, any creedal document’s grasp of the truth.

Reformed and Always Being Reformed.

So, our goal is not to defend what Calvin or his followers thought three or four hundred years ago. Being faithful descendants of them means that we do not simply repeat what they said, but that we take seriously what they themselves taught us about the authority of the word of God over every human word — including theirs! Meaning, look at the Scriptures for ourselves and ask the questions they taught us to ask: “What is the living God we know, in Christ and in the Bible, doing and saying in *our* time, *here* and *now*, where *we* have to think and live as Christians?”

We are on a continual quest for contextual truth! And we honor the Reformed tradition when we continue the Reformation begun in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and are willing, when necessary, to say things differently in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In looking at our Christian family tree, and having learned more about our history, it is evident that this religious family tree is not so different from any other family tree. It contains its fair share of complex dynamics; there have been divisions as well as reunions; and there are things we aren't proud of: I think of the crusades, corruption, colonization, abuse, and, unfortunately, the church is yet another institution that is not exempt from the systemic evil of racism (especially in the American church); it has been complicit in it and actively condoned it at times.

For me, this has been the most difficult truth to reconcile with because racism strongly conflicts with everything that I believe about being a Christian — that we are all created in God's image, we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves, that God calls us each "beloved," and so all people have inherent worth and value.

Yes, I was born into and raised Presbyterian of the Reformed Tradition, but I have also made the decision to stay in this denomination, and to pursue ordination in it. Why? Because our tenets of faith include a belief in **working toward the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the word of God**, because I appreciate being challenged to continually ask, "What is the living God I know, doing and saying *here* and *now*?" because it is our calling to always be reforming — to be on a continual quest for contextual truth.

Reformed and Always Being Reformed.

The PCUSA is governed by our *Book of Order* and our *Book of Confessions*, which contains 12 creedal-confessional documents written during a time span of over 1,600 years. We consider them "authoritative and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do. They continually point to and lead us back to the Scriptures." But each was written by humans, in a particular time, sociopolitical context, and are not meant to provide truth for all time.

To illustrate this, in seminary, one of my required courses was titled "The Reformed Tradition." For it, we bought several books, including the study edition of *The Book of Confessions*. I will never forget, on the first day of class, my professor asked us all to

pull out our copy of *the Book of Confessions* and instructed us to open it to the very last page, hold the back cover in our hand, and tear it off!

These documents point to and lead us back to Scripture, upholding our belief in the authority of Scripture, but they were not meant to provide truth for all time. This book captures some of our history, but it is evidence of how we have, numerous times, reformed our beliefs. My professor wanted us to have a tangible way to understand that more would and should be added to this book. And since then, another confession has been added.

We live in a world very much in need of love, peace, justice, and reconciliation. I acknowledge that my identity as a white Protestant, Presbyterian, Christian of the Reformed Tradition comes with complex family dynamics, interwoven systemic racism, and chapters of history many would rather forget. But we can't forget, I don't want to forget, I want to be aware, I want to affect change. This is why I feel called to the Reformed tradition — there is so much more of the reformation to take up! There are reparations to be made and reconciliation to participate in. Only then will there be justice, only then will there be healing, only then will there be peace.

So may we always be reforming, and may we be re-formed, always. Amen.