

We Are Catholic, Protestant, and Reformed

Digging Deeper into the Theology and Beliefs of the Presbyterian Church

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As Presbyterians we are Christians who are catholic, Protestant, and Reformed in our beliefs. The word order of this paradigm is intentional in that it moves along from a broad to a more distinct continuum, and it also frames the way we think about our Christian faith.

The Church, Catholic

The foundation of our core beliefs is the faith of the church catholic. By this we do not mean the Roman Catholic Church, but rather we are referring to the core doctrines of the Christian faith that have been believed by all Christians everywhere. So the word catholic, in this sense, means "universal," as opposed to referring to one particular group of Christians.

The faith of the church catholic is best expressed in the creeds of the early church, such as the Nicene and Apostle's Creeds. These classic statements of faith express the basic tenets of the Christianity, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, the incarnation of God in the man Jesus Christ, his virgin birth, his crucifixion on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins, his bodily resurrection from the dead, and his promised return to establish the new heavens and new earth.

At the heart of the Christian faith is the doctrine of the **Trinity**. The church fought mightily to preserve this doctrine as normative for all Christians. What pressed Christians to speak of God as one God who exists in three persons is the fact that the Bible teaches that God is one and also that it teaches that Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are also God, with each person being distinct from one another, yet not separate. What was at stake for the Christian faith was its understanding of salvation. If Jesus were simply a human being but not also God in human flesh then how could he save us from our sins, since only God can save? This dilemma compelled Christians to confess their belief in the one Triune God.

The doctrine of the Trinity also uniquely reflects the beautiful inner-shared relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Their relationship is a unified relationship of love, submission, mutuality, devotion, sacrifice, and fidelity to one another. The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that at the heart of God are relationships.

Piggy backing closely off of the doctrine of the Trinity is the doctrine of the **incarnation** of God. This doctrine teaches us that in the person of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, God came down to us so that we may know God. God is not impersonal, He has not left us abandoned, but God has come down to us in order to identify with us in our sufferings and to save us from our sins. God knows who we are and how we feel because God is with us in Jesus! More importantly, because God has come to us in the man Jesus Christ, we can know God face-to-face, intimately, in a relationship.

In coming down to us in the man Jesus, God did so miraculously through the **virgin birth** of Mary. There are many today, even in the church, who try to dismiss this doctrine as non-essential, but all of the apostolic creeds, standing on the clear testimony of Holy Scripture, affirm the virgin birth of Christ as a necessary doctrine. This doctrine is crucial to our theology because it reflects the divinity of Jesus. How could Jesus be God unless God brought about his birth outside of normal human conception? Also, without the virgin birth Jesus' sinless nature would not be possible, because all human beings are born sinners. Without it man's sinful nature would have been passed down to Christ. When we give up the virgin birth as a necessary doctrine we give up too much.

At the heart of the Christian faith is the cross. Christians believe that Jesus Christ was **crucified** so our sins could be forgiven. Man's dilemma is this: All mankind are sinners and because God is holy and can not tolerate our sin He justly punishes it. For if God did not judge sin God would not be God. The wages for our sin is death. Eternal separation from God is the just punishment given for our sin. But in Jesus Christ God gives us grace by taking that punishment upon Himself through the death of His Son. In short, Jesus pays the wage for our sins by satisfying God's wrath on sin, and then he declares us righteous and forgiven the grounds of his righteousness (Jesus was/is perfect and he lived and is living a perfect life before God on our behalf). We are saved by Jesus' work on the cross and his life of righteousness when we embrace him by faith.

Jesus' work on the cross would all be null and void were it not for his **bodily resurrection** from the grave. His resurrection vindicates (proves to be true) his work on the cross. The power of sin and death in our lives is defeated through Jesus' resurrection. Because death has no grip on Jesus neither will it have a grip on us who trust in him. His bodily resurrection also says something very fundamental about the love of God. God does not just love our spirits, but our bodies as well. That is why God will redeem our bodies through a new resurrected, glorified body at the end of the age. The doctrine of Christ's bodily resurrection is a non-negotiable doctrine of the Christian faith. The apostle Paul said that if Jesus did not rise from the dead then we are dead in our sins and our faith is futile. Everything about our faith rides on this doctrine being true.

The final doctrine of the faith of the church catholic is **the promised return of Jesus Christ to establish the new heavens and new earth**. As Christians we believe that we live in a "already but not yet" state of being. That is to say that our salvation has already been accomplished through Jesus' work on the cross (it is finished), yet we still live in a world that is beset by the powers of sin, death, and hell. This world is broken and Christians are not immune from the pain that is in it. Yet we believe that one day God will forever crush the powers of sin and the devil when Christ returns and God ushers in the new heavens and new earth. When that day happens, however it happens, God's work of redemption will finally be complete and there will be no more pain, crying, or tears for those who have trusted in Jesus. This is the sure and expectant hope that God calls us to live into, as we await the coming of our Savior. Come Lord Jesus, come!

The Church, Protestant

We are also Christians who are more distinctly Protestant in our beliefs.

The Protestant Reformation began in the 16th century in Europe as protest against moral, spiritual, and theological corruption that had taken root in the Roman Catholic Church.

Ultimately this led to the formation of new churches that came to be identified as Protestant Christian churches. Though many different branches of Protestantism developed there were some common theological beliefs that united all of them. Their bond of unity was the five *solas* of the Protestant Reformation- *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *sola scriptura*, *solo Christo*, *solus deo Gloria*. In English that's grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone, Christ alone, and Glory to God alone!

What does all that mean? In short, that we are saved (made right with God) by God's **grace alone**. Why must it be that way? Because we are sinners who are not deserving of God's salvation. Does this mean we have no responsibility to respond to God's grace? No. We are saved by God's grace alone, through the gift of **faith alone**. Our good works do not save us, only trusting and believing in God's grace is what makes our salvation real. Does this mean that we can have a generic faith? Believe anything we want? No. We are saved by grace alone, through the gift of faith alone, by **Christ alone**. Jesus is the chief object of our faith and the sole accomplisher of our salvation through is death on the cross for sinners. We can be saved in no other way. So, as you can see, these three *solas*- grace alone, faith alone, and Christ alone- are all deeply interconnected.

As Protestants we also believe that **scripture alone** is our final authority in all matters pertaining to faith and life in the church. The Word of God is what rules our lives; therefore the Bible trumps all human authorities who would seek to lead the church in a way that is contradictory to the teachings of scripture.

Finally, Protestants desire to give **glory to God alone** in all that they do, say, and believe. We are to live our whole lives for the glory of God. It is not about us and what we want; it's about God and what He wants for all of our lives. May we glorify God in everything!

The Church, Reformed

From out of Protestantism there emerged several different types of Christians. One branch became known as the Reformed faith. Presbyterians are a part of this unique family of faith. Reformed Christians trace their roots back to the teachings of John Calvin, who along with Martin Luther was one of the main leaders of the Protestant Reformation.

It is important to note that Calvinism was not a new invention. Calvin was deeply influenced by the teachings of St. Augustine and Augustine got his theology from the Apostle Paul! This means that Reformed theology is Biblical theology!

The core doctrines of the Reformed faith are the sovereignty of God over all creation, the depravity of the human race, the election and predestination of God's people for salvation in Jesus Christ, the necessity of sanctification in the Christian life, and the role of the covenant in the life of the church.

As Reformed Christians we believe that God is in control of the world and our lives. God has not abandoned it, or us, and neither is spinning out of control. God is guiding the events of human history, all for His glory, without infringing upon the freewill of human beings. This is what we mean by the **sovereignty of God**. God is in charge of all things!

We also know that something is wrong with this world. We have the same problem that our first parents, Adam and Eve had. The problem is sin and it affects us all. Reformed Christians do not believe that people are inherently good, but inherently sinful. Sure, we are all created in God's image and we are each capable of some good, but that does not negate the fact that our hearts are depraved- so much so that apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives we will not choose God, but ourselves. Our **depravity** affects all facets of our lives. That's why some people call it total depravity. It renders each one of us incapable of choosing Jesus apart from God's gracious intervention in our lives.

The belief that Reformed Christians are best known for is the doctrine of election and **predestination**. Presbyterians believe that from the very foundation of the world God chose to save us, His people, in Jesus Christ. When God makes a decision to save someone it is a done deal! The Holy Spirit will work on that person until he comes to genuine faith in Christ.

Why must God predestine us? First, because God is sovereign over our salvation- God calls the shots, not us. Second, if God did not choose to save us we would remain lost. We may have the "free will" to choose Jesus Christ, but the truth is that apart from God's predestining power at work in our lives we will always (because of our depravity and bondage to sin) choose death, not God. This doctrine is meant to give us comfort because it puts salvation squarely in God's hands- right where it ought to be and where it can not be lost.

Many people try to misrepresent the reformed doctrine of predestination by saying it leads to a *laissez-faire* attitude toward sin. It goes like this: "Since God has predestined me to be saved then I can do anything I want and not lose my salvation."

Presbyterians definitely believe that once a person comes to genuine faith in Jesus Christ that his salvation can not be lost, but we utterly reject any kind of theology that says "since we are saved we can do what we want." No! We believe that God has saved us in order to change us. God wants us to be holy as He is holy and God has chosen us in Jesus Christ so that we will become "holy and blameless in His sight." To grow in holiness and to become more like Jesus is to become sanctified. This is always God's will for the Christian life. We believe that **sanctification** is the necessary and inevitable fruit that is produced in the life of the believer.

Finally, the Biblical concept of **covenant** is of supreme importance to Presbyterians. We believe that covenants are different than contracts. Contracts expire and can be nullified by the default of one party. Covenants, on the other hand, are different because one of the parties involved is God and God always keeps His end of the deal, even when we do not.

In the Bible, God, at times, threatens to break covenant because of man's rebellion, but in the end we see that God keeps His covenant promises even though we mess up. This reality says something about God's sovereign will to accomplish our salvation, even though we are sinners who constantly miss the mark!

Covenants are also important to Presbyterians because we believe that our children are the direct benefactors of the promises of God. The children of believing parents are included in the covenant! We see this in the covenant that God made with Abraham (*the male children were circumcised as an outward sign that they were a part of God's covenant community*) and Moses (*the children were to partake of the Passover Meal and their parents were instructed to train them in the faith*) and most importantly, we see it in the covenant of salvation that God made with His people through Jesus Christ. In Acts 4:12 Peter says that we are to "repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins." He then says that the promises of the gospel are not just for us who believe, but also "for our children."

This whole concept of covenant is what leads Reformed Christians to baptize infants and allow baptized children to partake of the Lord's Supper, even though they have yet to make a formal public profession of faith. It is also undergirds our accepting children into the membership of the church, even though they have yet to confess the faith. We do this because we believe God will keep covenant with the children of believing parents. How so? By leading our children to confess their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior at some point in their lives. God is faithful to His promises and Presbyterians are kid friendly Christians!

Conclusion

It was stated at the beginning of this article that there was an intentional order to this pattern of being catholic, Protestant, and Reformed. All the doctrines are very important, but most certainly the doctrines of the faith of the church catholic are more foundational and non-negotiable than the more distinct doctrines of Protestant and Reformed Christianity. The faith lives or dies off of the faith of the church catholic.

It was also stated that this paradigm moves along from a broad to a more distinct continuum. By this I simply mean that all Christians are catholic Christians, but not all catholic Christians are Protestant or Reformed. Likewise all Reformed Christians are Protestant Christians but not all Protestant Christians are Reformed. This paradigm is indispensable in helping Presbyterians to frame their theology in proper order and emphasis.