

# Theology Matters

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**Note:** These questions supplement the Essential Tenets and Reformed Distinctives approved by the San Diego Presbytery and published in *Theology Matters* in Sep/Oct 2003. For copies of the original Essential Tenets issue of *Theology Matters* that includes questions for candidates, contact [scyre@swva.net](mailto:scyre@swva.net), call (540) 552-5325, or write, P.O. Box 10249, Blacksburg, VA 24062.

## Essential Tenets and Reformed Distinctives: Discussion Questions

By Bob Davis

When we ordain officers in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), one of the questions we ask is whether individuals “sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?”

We expect a “yes” answer.

Imagine the look on their faces if we digressed from the ordination questions and asked, “And what are the essential tenets of the Reformed faith?” You see, the problem is not in getting a “yes” answer, but rather in

helping people to identify what *are* those essential tenets of the Reformed faith that they have received and adopted.

We do a disservice to the church and to those who are being ordained and installed if we do not equip them to answer the questions seriously. San Diego Presbytery took a big step forward in addressing this problem by approving for use a document entitled “Essential Tenets and Reformed Distinctives.” What follows are questions designed to help illustrate the practical application of those six “Essentials” and seven “Reformed Distinctives.”

Why do this kind of training at all? Several reasons:

- a. **It is important to practice thinking theologically.** Thinking theologically is not something that comes naturally to people. It is not something that we are particularly accustomed to doing. In fact, there are several common reasons why people are reluctant to think theologically: they have been made to feel that they do not know as much as they should, they are embarrassed at their lack of knowledge, and they

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hope no one discovers how little they *really* know.

There is a remarkable transformation that takes place when people gain a little practice in addressing real life problems from a theological perspective.

- b. **It is important to practice thinking theologically together.** We are more accustomed to avoid discussing things theologically because “everyone has a right to his/her own opinion” or “everyone interprets Scripture differently” or “who am I to tell someone else how to think about things?” The problem is that when a real issue comes along, we are extremely uncomfortable dealing with it. Suddenly people become fascinated with *Robert’s Rules of Order* and procedural nuances because we are frightened by the prospect of talking theology. If we talk about “how do we talk about theology,” we do not ever have to get to the real issue. Further, we are reluctant because we do not know how others will respond.

By practicing how to speak theologically with each other now, we give ourselves tools to be able to deal with real issues when they come along—and they will.

- c. **It is important to practice bearing witness.** One of the things I observed during the week of the fires in San Diego last October was how many people from the congregation I serve were being asked to articulate their faith. It was amazing to see how many questions our folks fielded. I praised God that we had been practicing so that it was not awkward trying to explain faith for the first time.
- d. **It is a faithful thing to do.** Remembering who God is and who we are is really important. Practicing thinking theologically takes time and it requires some discipline—which, not coincidentally, is what being a disciple is all about.

The word problems help us become more familiar with the “tools of the trade” in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The idea is to present practical situations that are variations on real events that have occurred in congregations around the country. The assignment is this: before you can “respond” to the question, you have to figure out:

- What are the theological issues involved?
- What are the relevant Scripture, the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order* passages? (then and only then.... go to c.)
- How do you respond?

**Two final preliminary notes:** 1) We found that taking some time to do an initial reaction to the problems helped people get started on identifying issues. 2) When sharing answers, the leader takes on the role of the person to whom the response would be given; that way, the discussion gets beyond the hypothetical discussion of “how would we answer this” to “what are you saying to me?”

## Section 1

### Questions on the Essential Tenets

#### Authority of Scripture

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are God’s uniquely revealed and written Word, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and are the church’s first and final authority in all areas of faith and life including, but not limited to, theological doctrine, mission, church order, character, and ethical behavior.

The Bible speaks to us with the authority of God himself. We seek to understand, love, follow, obey, surrender, and submit to God’s Word—both Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, and the Scriptures, the written Word of God, which bear true and faithful witness to Jesus Christ.

#### Scripture

Matthew 4:4; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 3:16-17

#### Confessions

Second Helvetic Confession 5.001, 5.003, 5.010

Westminster Confession of Faith 6.006, 6.009

Larger Catechism 7.113-114

#### What is Not Affirmed

Any doctrine—

- that seeks to invalidate or subvert scriptural teaching concerning what is to be believed or how we are to live;
- that attempts to subordinate biblical authority to any human authority, cultural norm, or ideology—whether religious, ecclesiastical, governmental, political, economic, psychological, sociological, scientific, historical, philosophical, or other—as though the church should listen primarily to another voice than the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ as expressed in Scripture;
- that seeks or asserts a revelation from the Spirit of God which contradicts the Bible as Word of God, or that attempts to separate the Spirit from the Spirit-inspired words of Scripture, or that elevates the authority or modernity of the Spirit’s revelation above the revelation of Scripture;
- that rejects as historical fact the witness of Scripture to the incarnation, birth, ministry, miracles, death,

resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ (as, for example, summarized in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 and Acts 10:38);

- that seeks to follow a “Jesus Christ” apart from the Person, Work, and Will of Jesus Christ revealed in Scripture;
- that regards Scripture as subjectively, but not objectively, God’s written Word, or that maintains the Scriptures *contain* the Word of God, but are not in themselves the Word of God.

Orthodox reformed faith does not include any notion of a Church “reformed and reforming” that moves outside the boundaries of the authority of Christ and confession of his Lordship which are clearly revealed in Scripture. Or any ecclesiology or morality that attempts to subvert the headship of Jesus Christ and the authority of Scripture in the interests of an “inclusive” and overbroad institutional concern for “unity, peace, and purity.”

Jesus Christ is Lord of the church, and he rules the church through the written word of Scripture, illumined by the Holy Spirit.

**Questions:**

1. You serve on the nominating committee for your church. Someone in the congregation submits Jim Smith’s name as a possible elder nominee. In the committee, someone points out that Jim Smith is divorced and remarried and asks, “Doesn’t 1 Timothy 3 say that elders should be ‘the husband of one wife?’ Paul says that, ‘if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God’s church?’” Someone else asks, “Doesn’t Jesus say that divorce and remarriage is adultery in Mark 10?” The nominating committee’s process seems to come to a stop as they consider what they ought to do.
2. Your child is in 6<sup>th</sup> grade science class. There is a discussion about the age of the earth, when dinosaurs lived, and the geological discoveries billions of years old. Another student in the class says, “My parents say that the Bible says that God made the earth in six days.” Your child comes home and asks, “What do we believe?”

**Using Scripture, the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order:**

- a. What are the theological issues involved?
- b. What are the relevant Scripture, *Book of Confessions* and *Book of Order* passages?
- c. How do you respond?

**God**

We worship the one, only living and true God who is revealed in the Bible and who is the source of all life, glory, goodness, and blessedness.

**Trinity.** With the holy catholic church in all ages, we confess the mystery of the holy Trinity—that there is one God alone, infinite and eternal, Creator of all things, the greatest good, who is one in essence or nature, yet who exists in a plurality of three distinct persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

**Creation/Providence/Sovereignty.** God in the beginning created the universe and everything in it for the manifestation of God’s glory, eternal power, wisdom, and goodness. He is the sovereign ruler of creation, working all things according to the counsel of his omnipotent and righteous will. In gracious providence God continually upholds, directs, oversees, and governs creation—all creatures, actions, and things.

In sovereignty God has seen fit to accommodate free will among moral creatures, resulting in great cultural and cosmic good and terrible evil, disorder, and disobedience. Nevertheless, God is in no way the author of evil or sin, but continues to govern creation in such a way as to cause all things to work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose. God opposes all evil and will certainly triumph over it and bring creation to a glorious consummation.

**Grace.** God is a God of love. In grace God chooses to show love and mercy. When we were dead in trespasses and sin, God made us alive with Christ, saving us by grace through faith, as a sheer gift of sovereign love.

**Worship.** God—and God alone—is worthy of worship. We respond to God by consciously and intentionally seeking to declare, explore, celebrate, and submit to God’s righteous and gracious kingship over all of creation and over every aspect of our individual and corporate life, and thereby “to glorify him and enjoy him forever” (Westminster 7.01). This is true worship.

**Scripture**

Genesis 1:1; Exodus 20:4-5; Deuteronomy 6:4; Psalm 47:2; Isaiah 45:5; Matthew 28:19; Luke 1:35; John 14:26; Romans 1:23; 8:28; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 1:7-11; Jude 1:25; Revelation 4:11

**Confessions**

Nicene Creed 1.1, 1.3  
Scots Confession 3.01  
Heidelberg Catechism 4.027  
Westminster Confession of Faith 6.011-6.014  
Larger Catechism 7.01  
Brief Statement of Faith 10.1

**What Is Not Affirmed**

Any doctrine—

- that denies this doctrine of God’s triune nature, or refuses to confess the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit;
- that minimizes this doctrine as an unessential or

secondary Christian tenet;

- that asserts that all religions are essentially true, that all religious beliefs are essentially in accord; or that the views of God held by the world's major religions are equally valid;
- that confesses or celebrates belief in multiple gods or goddesses, or that identifies God as a goddess, or that worships God's uncreated glory through idols or images representing creatures or creation.

The biblical doctrine of God's sovereignty excludes:

- the notion that, if God is sovereign, our human efforts are in vain;
- the deistic notion that God created the cosmos like a watchmaker but is no longer personally involved in its operation or unfolding;
- any theology that denies or downplays the reality of evil or the enmity between evil and a holy God or the moral responsibility of humankind for sin.

#### **Questions:**

1. You go to a party at a friend's house. You have met some of the people there, some you do not know. The weather is nice and your friend has a fire-pit in their back yard. It is early evening, the fire is going and everyone gathers around to enjoy the evening. There are several different quiet conversations going on until one seems to draw others in. Some of the people you do not know are talking with your friend about "religion." The gist of their point is, "Well, all roads lead to heaven. I think if you are a good person, you try hard, God is going to understand." Your friend asks them if they worship anywhere. "No," they say, "we don't believe in organized religion. Jesus is God for Christians, Jews have Moses, Muslims have Mohammed, Buddhists have Buddha...it doesn't really make any difference." Your friend ponders on this for a moment, sees that you have joined in the circle and says, "What do you think? Does it make any difference what God you worship?"
2. There is a terrible automobile accident in your town. A driver under the influence of alcohol misses a turn and plows into a sandbox where a young child is playing. The child is killed. The family is well known in your community and belongs to your church. There is much anguish over the loss of this child. At the memorial service, other people from the community show up. Afterwards, a neighbor of yours sees you and comes over to talk. You chat together for a few minutes. Then, your neighbor says, "You know, it's this kind of thing that made me stop going to church. I have a really hard time believing in a God who would let this happen. He could have stopped it if he wanted to. Why didn't God stop it?"

#### **Using Scripture, the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order:**

- a. What are the theological issues involved?
- b. What are the relevant *Scripture, Book of Confessions and Book of Order* passages?

c. How do you respond?

### **Humanity—Original Righteousness and Fall into Sin**

Human beings were created by God in God's own image—in true righteousness and holiness—to know, love, and obey God and be righteous stewards of the creation. Our earliest forebears, instead of acknowledging, worshiping, and obeying God, became disobedient sinners and brought sin and death upon themselves and all creation.

There is now a radical brokenness and corruption in human nature that is the result of and results in sin. Sin is rebellion against God. No human effort can fully resolve or redeem this defect. Sin is destructive, contagious, parasitical, polluting, disabling. Human beings are sinners by nature, by influence, by choice, by action.

While there is an inalienable glory and nobility to human beings because they are God's image bearers, this image is now broken and distorted, and even our best and noblest actions are contaminated by sin. Every part of our human being—our personality, intellect, emotions, will, motives, virtues, and actions—is corrupted by sin. The human will, originally free and righteous, is now crippled and defective.

As a result, human beings are in bondage to sin and subject to God's holy judgment. Without God's intervening grace and salvation, they are lost and condemned.

#### **Scripture**

Genesis 1:26-27; Psalms 51:5, 143:2; Jeremiah 17:9  
Matthew 15:19-20; Romans 3:10-23; 5:18-19; 7:18-23;  
8:7; Ephesians 2:1-3

#### **Confessions**

Scots Confession 3.03  
Heidelberg Catechism 4.005, 4.006, 4.010  
Larger Catechism 7.135, 7.137  
Confession of 1967 9.12-13  
Brief Statement of Faith 10.3

#### **What Is Not Affirmed**

- The notion that human nature is basically good and self-redeemable through good effort, discipline, improved environment, etc.
- The notion that man's defective nature is the result of heredity or environment to such a degree that human beings are not morally responsible for their nature or behavior.
- The notion that God is the author of sin or that sin is part of his original plan to educate and improve humankind.

#### **Questions:**

1. Jack, who has a degree from seminary, offers to teach Sunday School in your congregation. You serve on the Christian Education Committee which is responsible for overseeing the classes. Jack comes in to talk with the committee about the class he'd like to teach. He has recently come to your community. He lives with Bill, whom he describes as his "partner." Jack would like to teach about church history, about God's liberating movement of oppressed people. He declares that he is a homosexual man. He suggests that homosexual persons are like modern-day Samaritans in the parable of the Good Samaritan. He says that the Church needs to welcome people just as they are because God loves us just as we are. After he leaves, the committee has to decide whether to approve Jack's request to teach a Sunday School class.
2. You go to the grocery store after worship one Sunday morning. At the busy checkout line, you use your ATM card. The clerk asks if you would like cash back and you say, "Yes," and press the \$20 amount on the keypad. She hands you the receipt for your groceries along with your bags and the cash. As you are putting the bags in your car, you remember that you were supposed to meet a friend and need to hustle to make it on time. Just then, you notice that the clerk actually gave you two new \$20 bills that are stuck together. You go back into the store and return \$20. Later, when explaining to your friend about your tardiness, he says, "Why go back in? It's their mistake and it's only twenty bucks! Shoot, you're a good person; God would understand if you kept it." How do you respond?

***Using Scripture, the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order:***

- a. What are the theological issues involved?
- b. What are the relevant Scripture, *Book of Confessions* and *Book of Order* passages?
- c. How do you respond?

**Jesus Christ – Incarnation of the Eternal Word**

Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human. In the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the eternal Son of God uniquely entered human history and became a real human being. He is truly the Word of God (John 1:1-3)—that is, the perfect and culminating expression of God's mind and heart, of God's will and character—present in the intimate fellowship of the Holy Trinity from eternity and fully engaged with the Father in the work of creation and redemption.

Becoming human, Jesus was "all of God in a human body" (Colossians 1:19) and "God with us" (Matthew 1:23)—a living tabernacle of God's holy presence, "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14-18). His divine-human identity is corroborated by the true witness of Scripture—in his

divine conception and virgin birth, in God's own testimony concerning Jesus, in Jesus' supernatural works of healing and deliverance, in his obedience to the point of sacrificial death, and in his bodily resurrection from the dead, ascension, and exaltation. He is now Lord over everything in creation.

The early church in the creeds of Nicea and Chalcedon accurately interpreted and expressed the apostolic testimony concerning Jesus—fully God and fully human. The significance of this is: in Christ we are dealing with God himself; in Christ we have a human being who truly represents us.

Jesus Christ is God's only Mediator between God and humankind and God's unique agent for the salvation of the world. He is also the perfect expression of what humanity was designed to be. In his complete obedience, he became the representative Human Being, a second Adam, modeling for us human life and offering to God on our behalf human life that is rightly in God's image—reflecting God's glory in a wholly submitted life of steadfast love and righteousness.

This same Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, as attested in Scripture, is to be the center of the Christian Church's proclamation, worship, discipleship, and mission. As we eagerly and prayerfully anticipate that "he will come again to judge the living and the dead" and to establish God's righteous kingdom in fullness and perfection, we say, "Come Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20).

***Scripture***

Matthew 1:23; Luke 1:31-35; John 1:1-3, 14-18; Romans 5:18-19; 2 Corinthians 5:19; Colossians 1:15-20; 1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 1:1-3; 1 John 4:2-4

***Confessions***

Nicene Creed 1.1-1.2  
Westminster Confession of Faith 6.044  
Confession of 1967 9.07-9.08  
Brief Statement of Faith 10.2

***What Is Not Affirmed***

Any doctrine—

- that affirms the deity but not the full humanity of Christ, or the humanity but not Christ's full deity (as, for example, the Jehovah's Witnesses do);
- that asserts that Jesus was an inspired or extraordinary or holy man, but was merely human in nature and not the incarnation in history of the eternal Son of God;
- that attempts to supplement the authoritative revelation of the Old and New Testament Scriptures concerning Jesus Christ and proposes a corrected or revised revelation of Jesus (as, for example, the Book of Mormon and Mormon teaching do);
- that discounts or discredits as untrue or as myth all or portions of the New Testament record concerning Jesus;
- that does not affirm as biblical and true the death of Christ as the central saving act of our Christian faith, or

- that asserts that Jesus is merely one example, however noteworthy, of a divinely approved or divinely enlightened life;
- that asserts that Jesus is one Mediator between God and humankind among other religious options or among other spiritual or enlightened teachers or mediators;
- that contends that the Jesus Christ attested by Scripture is essentially and significantly different from the historic Jesus of Nazareth;
- that misrepresents Jesus' mission in terms compatible with pantheism or as a message of human self-fulfillment and divine self-realization, that God is one being with the world or that human beings are essentially divine, and that all religious truth is harmonious and convergent;
- that detracts from Jesus' supreme authority over every human authority, over the church, and over our individual moral lives.

**Questions:**

1. It is December, and your town is throwing its annual Winter Celebration at the community center. The Celebration is a popular event. Almost everyone from the town gathers at the community center, shares apple cider and listens to the elementary school students sing a mix of Christian and non-Christian winter carols. One of the members on session is the President of the Community Center. She asks you, the new pastor, to give a quick prayer at the opening of the event. But, she asks you to be sensitive to the different people of faith in the town and not to say 'Jesus Christ,' but to use 'God' instead. She notes how this would be a great time to introduce you as new pastor to the community.
2. A session member approaches you with an idea for a service. He says that he had just watched on TV a service for the kidnapped/murdered girl in California, Samantha Runyon. The service was held at the huge Crystal Cathedral in Southern California because the church was large enough to hold most of Samantha's hometown. The pastor of Crystal Cathedral announced that the family had requested—and the church had approved—of a prayer service in which different candles would be placed on the communion table representing different faiths. The session member says that he thought it was a good way to build community and wants to organize a similar inclusive service at your church.

**Using Scripture, the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order:**

- a. What are the theological issues involved?
- b. What are the relevant Scripture, *Book of Confessions* and *Book of Order* passages?
- c. How might you respond?

**Jesus Christ – His Atoning Work**

Jesus' death on the Cross was the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. In this act of obedience to God's will and love for humankind, Jesus acted as the divine agent for the salvation of the world. In his death he perfectly fulfilled the office of High Priest and was also the perfect sacrifice for sins— "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). The Cross became an altar on which his life was sacrificed as a substitute for ours, and satisfaction and expiation for sins were completely accomplished. On the sole basis of the finished work of Christ on the Cross, sinners may now be reconciled to a holy God and set free from their bondage to sin and death to live for God in holiness and joy.

Exalted to the place of honor beside God the Father, Jesus Christ the eternal Son, now Lord of heaven and earth, continues his saving work, advocating and interceding on behalf of the church and functioning as our eternal prophet (God's living and revealed Word), priest (ever making intercession and mediation for us), and king (ruling his church by Word and Spirit and with sovereign love and power).

**Scripture:**

Matthew 1:21; Romans 3:25;  
 1 Corinthians 1:23-25; 2:2; 15:3; 2 Corinthians 5:19, 21;  
 Galatians 3:13; 6:14; Ephesians 1:19-23;  
 Hebrews 9:11-12; 1 Peter 3:18; 1 John 2:2

**Confessions:**

Scots Confession 3.09  
 Heidelberg Catechism 4.031, 4.037  
 Confession of 1967 9.09

**What Is Not Affirmed**

Any theology—

- that does not affirm as biblical and true the death of Christ as the central saving act of our Christian faith, or
- that rejects these teachings—atonement, substitutionary sacrifice, expiation for sins on the basis of Christ's death—as obsolete, unworthy, unessential, or irrelevant, or
- that seeks to substitute some other basis or to promote some "more culturally relevant paradigm" for our salvation, justification, and reconciliation with God than Christ's death on the Cross for us.

We also do not affirm the notion that Christ's atoning work is universally applied to all or most of the human race, so that all or most are saved, regardless of their religion or nonreligion and apart from hearing the gospel and believing in Christ.

**Questions:**

1. One of the other members of your Sunday School class comes to you. "I don't know how my name got on this mailing list," she says, "but I received this pamphlet from the denomination today. I thought I'd browse my way through it. It's about the church. In

this section, the author defines Christian faith as ‘recognizing that God is God and we are not.’ And then, the author writes that God even became one of us. That was it. Does this church think there’s any significance to the cross and resurrection?”

2. You and your friends are dining at a restaurant. Across the street, there is an empty storefront. The local papers have been filled with stories about how an “adult” bookstore has filed an application for a zoning variance to allow it to occupy the space. Several people are milling about in front of the space, handing out pamphlets. The conversation at the table turns to the topic and one of your friends says, “I can’t imagine that God is at all pleased that this might be an acceptable business in the community. Did Jesus die for these porn peddlers, too?”

**Using Scripture, the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order:**

- a. What are the theological issues involved?
- b. What are the relevant Scripture, *Book of Confessions* and *Book of Order* passages?
- c. How do you respond?

**Salvation by Grace through Faith**

Salvation is God’s gracious work through Jesus Christ to reclaim humankind and all creation from sin and its consequences. Salvation is a gift of God’s grace received by faith. Christ’s righteousness and atonement are the sole basis for human salvation. Faith in Christ is the only instrument by which this righteousness is received by individual believers, resulting in their justification.

Justification is the righteousness of Christ imputed to a sinful woman or man *through faith alone* in Christ. Their faith appropriates Christ’s atonement, resulting in their sins atoned for and forgiven and God reckoning them to be righteous.

Scripture also describes salvation as a ransom or redemption from slavery (Mark 10:45); a sacrificial substitution (Christ’s death for our death); reconciliation of sinners with a holy God; our sins being sacrificially expiated, satisfied, covered over, forgiven, and removed. All of these ways describe how God has given us “the forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation out of sheer grace solely for the sake of Christ’s saving work” (Heidelberg 4.021).

Faith is (1) accepting the message of salvation as true and (2) trusting God to apply this salvation to us. Faith is “certain knowledge” and “wholehearted trust,” that is created in us by the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. In faith we accept, receive, and rest “upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace” (Westminster, 6.080).

**Scripture**

Mark 10:45; John 3:16; Acts 4:12; Romans 3:22-26; 5:1; Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8-9

**Confessions**

Second Helvetic Confession 5.107-109, 5.112-113  
Heidelberg Catechism 4.021, 4.060  
Westminster Confession of Faith 6.080  
Brief Statement of Faith 10.4

**What is Not Affirmed**

Any doctrine—

- that asserts that salvation can be obtained through other religions or that other religions have equally valid solutions to the human problem, or that there is salvation in some other name besides Jesus Christ
- that denies the radical sinfulness of human beings, their condemnation before a holy God, that denies that human beings are lost apart from Christ, or denies their need for a Savior
- that teaches that God saves or will save everybody (or nearly everybody) regardless of their faith in Jesus Christ or whether they hear the gospel or not or whether they put their faith explicitly in Jesus Christ or not.

**Questions:**

1. You are sitting in your regular pew one Sunday morning. The man who sits next to you almost every Sunday also is there. After worship you stand and begin to chat with him. He seems distressed. He says, “You know, I’ve been coming to church since I was a boy. I went through a confirmation class because my parents made me go. At the end of that class years ago, I stood in front of the church and said I believed in Jesus; and I think I did. I’ve tried to be a pretty good person. I think I have been a pretty good person. I’ve made mistakes—sure, but who hasn’t? It’s not like I’ve murdered anyone or anything. I’m beginning to wonder, though; is that good enough to get me into heaven?”
2. One of the teenagers in your congregation is having a lot of problems. She is having arguments with her parents. She appears sullen and distant when she is in worship. She does not get along with her friends any longer. You are friends with the family and silently grieve as this situation seems to be getting worse.

Then, one Thursday afternoon, you stop into a coffee shop. You have about an hour before you have to meet a business associate. You sit down and notice that this girl is sitting nearby. She’s staring into nothing. You wonder if you should go over to say something and, as you are debating in your mind, she makes eye contact with you. She approaches you and says, “I just want to let you know that I’m leaving. You’ve always been nice to me, so I thought I’d tell you before I go. I can’t go to that church anymore—I feel like such a hypocrite. The stuff I’ve done, there’s no way that God (if there is one) could ever forgive me. So, I’m going somewhere else and going to start new. Anyway, thanks for being nice.” She lingers for

a moment and so you quickly ask her to sit down and spend a little time with you. She does.

**Using Scripture, the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order:**

- a. What are the theological issues involved?
- b. What are the relevant Scripture, *Book of Confessions* and *Book of Order* passages?
- c. How do you respond?

## Questions on the Reformed Distinctives

### Election for Salvation and Service

Our salvation and sanctification are based entirely on God's initiative and God's grace. It is not primarily about *our* choice but *God's* choice. The Reformed understanding of election is that God has chosen us *in Christ* for salvation and service—

- To be redeemed,
- To be God's own "treasured possession," a holy nation and a kingdom of priests,
- To live holy and exemplary lives, zealous for good works,
- Resulting in praise for the glory of God's grace.

Our salvation is not an accident we stumble into or a destiny we create. It is God's gracious purpose for our life and it is for God's glory.

God has elected us out of grace.  
God has elected us from eternity.

We are elected *in Christ*, that is—

Christ is God's elected Son, chosen to redeem God's creation and to be Mediator and Savior for humankind. Our election is not direct, but indirect—we are elected on account of Christ, with the result that those who are now grafted into Christ by faith are also to be elected.

As those chosen by God, we are predestined to be conformed to the image of Jesus. Our purpose, then, is to glorify God by our redeemed and sanctified life.

Our faith in Christ and our good works are evidence and confirmation that we are chosen by God to be His.

Election is a doctrine intended to reassure Christians of the security of their salvation and of the steadfast love of God for them, and to instill in them a sense of divine purpose and a zeal for good works.

A person may know with complete assurance, on the basis of the promises of Scripture and God's faithfulness, that if they are trusting in Christ for their salvation, they indeed are in Christ and are elected.

**Scripture**

Psalm 139:16;  
John 15:5, 8, 16; Ephesians 1:4-7, 11-13; Ephesians 2:10;  
2 Timothy 1:9

**Confessions**

Scots Confession 3.08  
Second Helvetic Confession 5.052, 5.053, 5.059-60

**What Is Not Affirmed**

Any doctrine—

- that denies God's initiative in calling persons to Himself;
- that asserts that all people will ultimately be reconciled to God;
- that asserts a profession of faith without bearing any fruit.

**Questions:**

1. You cannot sleep one night. You turn on the television and begin flipping the channels. On one of the channels is a televangelist; someone you have not ever seen before. He is very animated. Curious, you stop changing channels to see what this guy is shouting about. He's pointing into the camera and, very earnestly, says, "Have you chosen Jesus Christ? God is waiting for you to choose. Today is the day; if you don't choose today, when will you? Are you so certain that you won't go out and get hit by a bus? And, if you haven't chosen, how will you know where you will be spending eternity?" That Sunday, you raise the question of "choosing" with your Sunday School class and someone else says, "Yeah, I saw that guy, too. I thought we believed in predestination. What do you think?"
2. In your congregation is an older couple. They have been married for 56 years. They are in an assisted living facility. Both are fresh in spirit and sharp in mind. Recently, John's arthritic condition has been getting worse; it is so painful that it is agonizing to move from one room to another. Ann understands, but objects to having to assume additional responsibilities, such as managing the couple's finances. They are arguing more and more. John confides in you, "You know, sometimes I think about just taking too many of these pain pills so that I can end all of this."

**Using Scripture, the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order:**

- a. What are the theological issues involved?
- b. What are the relevant Scripture, *Book of Confessions* and *Book of Order* passages?
- c. How do you respond?

## Covenant and Covenant Life

Covenant, in the cultural context of the Bible, described the strongest relationship of love and loyalty between persons. It was a solemn relationship and bond, often with explicit oaths and obligations, often sealed solemnly with the blood of sacrifice. Reconciliation after hostility and conflict was often marked by a covenant ceremony. A covenant was entered into by faith as a relationship of trust and solemn promises; it was held together by faithfulness. Covenant faithfulness led to blessing and life; breaking covenant invoked a curse. Covenants described the relationship between rulers and subjects, wife and husband, business partners, neighboring nations. God adapted this covenant model to describe his special relationship and bond with the people he redeemed.

God's covenants had different forms and details at different times in salvation history (for example, with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David), but they reflected a single sovereign and gracious purpose to redeem, sanctify, and preserve a people who belonged to God. The divine covenant was always initiated by God; it was sustained by God's faithfulness in spite of humankind's history of unfaithfulness; it was an expression of God's steadfast love (Hebrew, *hesed*); and it reached a culmination and fullness in the "new covenant" (Luke 22:20) established and perfected by Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, the promised Messiah, we encounter personally and directly the Mediator of God's perfect and everlasting covenant (Hebrews 9:15). Jesus has perfectly fulfilled the obligations of the covenant for us; he has demonstrated complete faithfulness to God as a covenant partner. In his substitutionary death he took on himself the curse for our covenant breaking, ended the hostility our sins had caused, reconciled us and made us right with God. Those who put their faith in Christ are spiritually united with him, enter the new covenant where there is salvation and redemption, become members of the covenant community called *the church*, and enjoy the covenant promises of eternal life and blessing.

Every believer is called to be a faithful and participating member of a local church, where "the community of the new covenant" has local expression and where they can be disciplined into holiness and maturity. The community of the new covenant is to be a demonstration of the supernatural reality and power of the kingdom of God—what the world looks like and might become where God is acknowledged as King; a community of love and wholeness; a ministry extending the healing, deliverance, and grace that marked the life of Jesus and his disciples.

### Scripture

Genesis 6:18; 9:8-17; 17:1-8; Exodus 19:3-6;  
2 Samuel 7:12-16; Isaiah 9:6-7;  
Jeremiah 23:5-6; 31:31-34  
Luke 22:20; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:12-13;  
Hebrews 9:15; 1 Peter 2:9-10

### Confessions

Scots Confession 3.16  
Second Helvetic Confession 5.125-5.126  
Confession of 1967 9.31

### What Is Not Affirmed

Any doctrine—

- that promotes a covenant life which is to be lived out in a solitary manner, devoid of community;
- that suggests that covenant life need not be different than the life of the unbeliever in any profound way;
- that would seek to lay the foundation of our covenant life on anything other than or contrary to God's Word.

### Questions:

1. You meet your neighbor in the grocery store. In the produce aisle, she says to you, "Do you belong to that Presbyterian Church in town?" You answer that you do. "What's it like? It's not too churchy is it? I'm tired of going to churches that either try to put on a show or immediately ask you to do something. Sheesh. In fact, for a long time now I haven't gone to church at all. I believe in God, you know, but I think that I'm better off by myself than trying to fit into someone else's idea of what I should be. What do you think? Should I try your church?"
2. One of the keynote speakers at an event you are attending begins talking about how Christians relate to people of other faiths. He says that Christians need to understand that Jesus is one window through which God's light shines, but there are many other windows—with varying degrees of enlightenment. "We need to understand that we live in a global community and have to put these divisive things away if we are going to all get along. We are all God's children and need to understand that's what connects us together. It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe something." One of the kids in your youth group asks you, "If that's true, does it matter which church someone goes to?"

## Sacraments

The church receives from the Lord Jesus Christ two sacred and symbolic actions, called sacraments, which enact and perform (symbolize and seal) the promises of the gospel. These sacraments are Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Baptism is the sign and seal of incorporation into Christ and of the washing away of sin through his sacrifice. Baptism publicly acknowledges that the one baptized is part of the covenant community of faith. Baptizing infants reminds us that God reaches out to us even before we are able to respond in faith.

The Lord's Supper, using bread and wine, is the sign and seal of our ongoing communion with the living Christ and of his life continuing to nourish us. Celebrating the Lord's

Supper, we give thanks as we remember that Christ lived for us, Christ died for us and Christ will come again.

Both sacraments point to and remind us of the holy sacrifice of Christ for us. The Holy Spirit uses these sacraments—the common signs of water and of bread and wine, combined with the promises in the gospel of eternal life and forgiveness through Christ—to convey grace, salvation, and the real presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, which are received in faith by the believing community in their worship together.

### **Scripture**

Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 2: 38-39,42; 16:31-33;  
Romans 6:3-4; 1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:23-26; 12:13

### **Confessions**

Heidelberg Catechism 4.066, 4.069-4.071, 4.074, 4.075-4.079

Second Helvetic Confession 5.169, 5.175, 5.205

Shorter Catechism 7.094, 7.096

Confession of 1967 9.51, 9.52

Brief Statement of Faith 10.4

### **What Is Not Affirmed**

- that the physical body and blood of Jesus are actually present in the Lord's Supper;
- that there are other sacraments besides the two instituted by the Lord Jesus;
- that other sacraments can be instituted as the church deems suitable such as milk and honey, etc.;
- that these sacraments are mere symbols or do not involve a supernatural presence of Christ or do not supernaturally perform what they signify, that is, *wash from sins* and *nourish us with Christ's very life*;
- that the sacraments confer grace whether or not they are received in faith.

### **Questions:**

1. Helen Smith is your sweet, elderly neighbor. She bakes cookies for all the children in the neighborhood and occasionally gives you flowers and vegetables from her garden. She is a faithful member of your congregation. Her daughter and son-in-law live out of state. They are coming to visit with their newborn infant next week. Helen tells you, "I wish they were better about attending their church—even though it's Southern Baptist."

She knows you are an elder, so she says to you, "Say, I know Pastor is out of town this week, but do you think he could baptize the baby here at the house next week? I don't think my daughter would mind—she's not even a member of that church. I have a pool in the back yard, so that wouldn't be any problem. They will be here from Wednesday through Saturday, so anytime would be great. I'm all tied up in getting ready, do you think you could you ask him for me?"

2. During the communion service two weeks before the session meeting, one of the servers tripped and

dropped the cups tray all over the chancel and front steps. Both ministers managed to dodge the flying cups. The tumbling cups rolled around on the tile. There was a stunned silence for a moment, a few chuckles, and then just an awkward pause. The service proceeded, but during the final hymn, the custodian appeared at the front of the church with a mop to clean it up. One of the elders was right behind, urging him to "take care of it now, before the stain sets in."

At the beginning of the session meeting, the clerk announces that she has received a letter complaining about the whole situation—that the mistake was understandable, but the response was inexcusable. The member was particularly irked by the cavalier manner in which the consecrated elements were handled.

### **Using Scripture, the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order:**

- a. What are the theological issues involved?
- b. What are the relevant Scripture, *Book of Confessions* and *Book of Order* passages?
- c. How do you respond?

## **Sanctification and the Work of the Holy Spirit**

The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in the individual and collective life of believers effects real transformation—a life of increasing holiness, righteousness, power, and love, as we are changed more and more into the image of Christ. Though Christians are marred by sin and imperfect until Christ returns, there is a substantial manifestation of the righteousness and power of the kingdom of God in the believer, the church, and the world through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit connects us to the life of Christ and releases in us the supernatural and saving power of Christ's life, death, resurrection, and glory.

### **Scripture**

Romans 8:29; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 6:11; Galatians 5:22-25; Philippians 2:12-13; 2 Thessalonians 2:13

### **Confessions**

Scots Confession 3.12

Westminster Confession of Faith 6.075-6.077

Shorter Catechism 7.035

Larger Catechism 7.188

### **What Is Not Affirmed**

Any doctrine—

- that proclaims that total perfection occurs in this lifetime (1 Corinthians 13:10-12);
- that proclaims "As though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other

lords—areas in which we do not need justification and sanctification through Him” (Barmen Declaration 8.15).

**Questions:**

1. Sunday morning rolls around. You get to church and grab a pew in the back. A visitor comes in and sits near you. The sermon text is Philippians 2:12-14, “Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” The sermon goes on to talk about how believers are engaged in a relationship with the living God, and how Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith. After the service, the woman says to you, “This is my first time in a Presbyterian Church. It is *so* different than my Catholic church. I thought all I had to do was be in good standing with my priest and everything was OK. What’s this ‘sanctification’ stuff and what am I supposed to do?”
2. You are at the church picnic. You are sitting with friends who have teenagers. “Oh, what a battle we had,” says June. “Trying to get Amy to wear appropriate clothing for church and church functions just sets off tempers all over the house. Every time, it’s the same thing, ‘It’s my life. No one else has the right to tell me what I should wear because it’s my choice to do what I want.’”

There’s much sympathy around the circle. Then, someone says, “You know, I remember being like that when I was a kid, too. Now, I just get tired when people try to tell me what I have to do with money. Maybe when I’m retired I’ll just get to do what I want with my stuff.” A third says, “What do you think about what the Pastor said this morning about God having authority over every aspect of our life. What does God care about clothes and money if we believe in Jesus?”

**Using Scripture, the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order:**

- a. What are the theological issues involved?
- b. What are the relevant Scripture, *Book of Confessions* and *Book of Order* passages?
- c. How do you respond?

**Priesthood of All Believers**

Every believer, as a disciple of Jesus Christ, is called to participate in his priestly ministry. A priest functions to reconcile people to God. Jesus Christ is the eternal high priest of God’s new covenant, who offered himself as an atoning sin offering on our behalf and who is our eternal advocate before the throne of God. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” All believers are called as disciples to do this ministry of Jesus—to participate in

his priestly work of reconciling the world to God by proclaiming the gospel, doing the works of Jesus, and manifesting the reality and power of the kingdom of God in the world. This ministry is not reserved exclusively for ordained clergy and officers, but is the vocational privilege and responsibility of every Christian.

**Scripture**

Exodus 19:6  
Matthew 10:1, 6-7; 28:18-19; 1 Corinthians 12:7, 14, 27; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20, 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:5-6

**Confessions**

Second Helvetic Confession 5.153  
Confession of 1967 9.31, 9.38

**Questions:**

1. You sing in the choir. One Sunday, after church, you hear people really getting down on someone who is not there. They detail every negative aspect of the person in “can-you-believe” exasperated tones. Perceiving this to be gossip, you challenge them. It takes some courage, you think to yourself, but you fully expect them to realize the correctness of your observation. You are surprised, however, when one of the participants says, “Oh, it doesn’t make any difference. Who is it hurting? It’s not like we’re the pastor or anything. What’s the big deal?”
2. You are at a picnic. Conversation is light when someone mentions that Martha, an older woman in the congregation, has been hospitalized. “I hope someone has gone to see her,” says one of your acquaintances. “Oh, I’m sure the pastor has,” says another. “It’s his job to do that, anyway.” There is a collective nodding from most of the rest of the group and the conversation moves on. After a few moments, Brad speaks up and says, “You know, I’m not real comfortable with how we just left that. Is it really the pastor’s job? Does that get us off the hook?” Brad then looks at you and—before you can think “I’ve got to stop coming to these parties”—says, “How about it? Who does those things in your congregation?”

**Using Scripture, the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order:**

- a. What are the theological issues involved?
- b. What are the relevant Scripture, *Book of Confessions* and *Book of Order* passages?
- c. How do you respond?

**Mission of the Church**

God’s redeeming and reconciling work in the world was accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and continues through the church, the body of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture,

and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven in the world. Jesus Christ, as the Lord of the church, calls the church into being, declares its mission, and supernaturally equips it for its work. Its mission is:

- To be the provisional demonstration of the new reality God intends for humanity;
- To proclaim the good news of salvation by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, leading persons to repentance, acceptance of Christ as Savior and Lord, and new life as his disciples;
- To make disciples of all nations;
- To demonstrate new life in Christ tangibly through its love for one another and the quality of its common life together, sharing in worship, fellowship, and nurture, practicing a deepened life of prayer and service under the guidance of the Holy Spirit;
- To participate in God's activity in the world through its life for others.

The church is to commit itself fully to this mission, waiting for and hastening the Lord's coming again.

#### **Scripture**

Matthew 9:36-38, 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; Romans 10:13-15; 2 Peter 3:10-13

#### **Confessions**

Westminster Confession of Faith 6.058  
Confession of 1967 9.06, 9.43, 9.44-9.46.

#### **What Is Not Affirmed**

Any witness of the Church—

- that distorts the gospel message or holds it captive to culture;
- that seeks justice apart from the truth of Christ;
- that elevates sociology, psychology, education or any other discipline above the clear witness of Scripture;
- that self-righteously appeals to others to live faithful and obedient lives rather than acknowledging the Church's reliance on the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit in its own life and witness;
- that is motivated by anything other than the love of Christ.

#### **Questions:**

1. One of the members of your congregation receives a mailing including the following appeal:

Last year the religious community was instrumental in the fight to cancel much of Africa's unpayable debt. That Jubilee campaign brought many groups together, including the Washington Office, in their struggle for poverty relief. And it worked. Today, many poor people across the world are better off, but for how long?

Debt relief is one issue among many that needs constant attention; in fact, international debt relief will need to have its funding authorized by Congress this year. The work does not end, nor does our need for support. We urge you to join and support our work in Washington, to work with like-minded Presbyterians for the most important causes in the world.

Hal has recently joined your congregation and does not have a Presbyterian background. He asks you, "Is debt relief a big issue for Presbyterians? Are there others? I guess I just don't quite get how this is related to Jesus. Can you help? What is the mission of the church?"

2. It is November. Stewardship "moments for mission" begin popping up in the worship services. One Sunday, as a testimony is being given, you hear a visitor grumble, "I knew it. All they care about is getting my money." She sees that you heard and is slightly embarrassed. After the service, you make a point of greeting her. "I liked the service," she says politely. You sense that you have an opportunity to share a little more about the mission of your congregation. What do you say?

#### **Using Scripture, the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order:**

- a. What are the theological issues involved?
- b. What are the relevant Scriptural, Book of Confessions and Book of Order passages?
- c. How do you respond?

### **Stewardship**

God has given us all that we have and all that we are. He charges us with the responsibility of using all our abilities and gifts in his faithful service and to his glory—and especially to further the work and mission of the church, to relieve suffering and help the poor, to resist the devil and overcome evil. In particular God has ordered us to manage and care for creation as grateful stewards and obedient servants.

Jesus Christ is Lord of every area of our life—our spiritual life and our physical life; our social life including marriage, politics, justice, and culture; our intellectual life; our work life and our recreational life; the use of our bodies, our possessions, our resources, and our money. We are to be stewards of all of these things to manifest and extend the kingdom of God in the world, to extend the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth, and to bring glory to the name of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.

#### **Scripture**

Psalm 24:1

Romans 12:1; 1 Corinthians 4:7; Titus 2:14;  
1 Peter 4:8-11

**Confessions**

Larger Catechism 7.251

Confession of 1967 9.46

Brief Statement of Faith 10.33, 10.38

**Questions:**

1. Your neighbor and you are visiting in front of your homes one day. He laments that his teenage son “looks like a billboard.” The odd thing, says your neighbor, “is that he’s a Christian. All of the tattoos are symbols from the Bible. His earrings are crosses and one of the piercings is a nail to symbolize Christ’s crucifixion. I don’t get it, but it seems to work for him.” Then, he says, “You are pretty involved in your church. Is it ok to do these things? I don’t even know where or how to begin thinking about it; can you help me so that I can work through the issues with him?”

2. You come home from a hard day of work. You collapse on the couch and grab the remote for the television. You do a fast lap around the stations and don’t see anything particularly interesting. As you start around again—hoping to find something you missed the first time—you think to yourself, “I just want something to entertain me. Is that too much to ask?” You are startled by your own question. Then, you wonder, “Is this really what life’s about?” You pause, turn off the television, and start thinking, “what is my life really about?” How do you answer yourself?

**Using Scripture, the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order:**

- a. What are the theological issues involved?
- b. What are the relevant Scripture, *Book of Confessions* and *Book of Order* passages?
- c. How do you respond?

**Sermons on Marriage Wanted!**

We are planning an issue of *Theology Matters* next Spring with reprints of sermons on Marriage. If you or your pastor have a sermon on marriage that you would like considered for publication in *Theology Matters*, send it to  
*Theology Matters*,  
P.O. Box 10249,  
Blacksburg, VA 24062.

The deadline for submissions is January 15, 2005. Sermons will not be returned unless a stamped self-addressed envelope is included.

**If you would like additional copies of the original publication of the Essential Tenets from the Sep/Oct 2003 issue of *Theology Matters*, call or write to us at:**

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Thank you for your faithful support over the past almost 10 years. Your partnership with us has made it possible to send *Theology Matters* to 13,000 Presbyterian Church (USA) lay people and pastors. In addition, your support allows us to send *Theology Matters* to over 70 pastors, teachers

and laity in Pakistan, China, Cameroon, Scotland, Kenya, England, Canada, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Malaysia, Yucatan, Mexico, Bolivia, West Java, Indonesia, Ghana, Netherlands, Egypt, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Venezuela Guatemala, West Bengal, India, Zambia, and Ethiopia.

The articles in *Theology Matters* are helping Presbyterians and Reformed Christians around the world articulate their faith and its implications for righteous living. The Book of Order, part of our PCUSA Constitution, reaffirms the historic principles of Church order saying,

*...truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness, according to our Savior's rule, 'By their fruits ye shall know them.' And that no opinion can be either more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man's opinions are. On the contrary, we are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise, it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or to embrace it. (G-1.0304)*

*Theology matters!* We cannot bear the fruit of holy living, unless we know the truth of Christ and the implications of His truth for our lives. Belief and practice are related. Right belief, through the power of the Holy Spirit, can lead to right practice. Truth and righteousness are related. *Theology matters!*

We are committed to addressing topics in *Theology Matters* that help Christians discern Truth and it's implications for peace, unity and holiness in our personal lives and the life of the church. Readers share copies of *Theology Matters* with other Christians and with some civic legislators. Several articles in *Theology Matters* have been reprinted by renewal organizations in Canada and England. One request for reprinting asked to mail an article in *Theology Matters* to over 600 Anglican clergy.

*Theology Matters* is having an impact on the PCUSA and Christians around the world. Your contribution to *Theology Matters* makes this vital work possible. Please consider partnering with us to continue this crucial ministry by making a donation today. We do not have paid staff. All of our expenses are directly related to printing and publishing *Theology Matters*.

We are not supported by large foundations. Our support comes from individual Presbyterians and churches that believe Truth is crucial to right living. As Christians, we have a mandate from Christ himself to speak the truth clearly and persuasively in love and call all people to holy living. Please make a donation today to support this vital ministry.

Serving Him with you,

Kari McClellan, President

## Study of the Heidelberg Catechism

### Study 3: Questions 10-19: God's Gift of a Redeemer

By Rev. Dr. Stephen Eyre, College Hill Presbyterian Church, Cincinnati, OH

Karl Menninger, the psychiatrist asks the question in his book of the same title, *Whatever Became of Sin?* I wonder if anyone has ever written a book entitled *Whatever Became of the Wrath of God?* If it is unpopular to talk about sin, it is even more unpopular to talk about the wrath of God. I remember a brief look at Jonathan Edward's

famous sermon, "Sinners in the hands of an angry God" in a high school literature class. Few were impressed and most were offended.

After a short but penetrating teaching on sin and human nature which we considered in our last study, the Heidelberg Catechism turns to the character of God, questions 10 through 18. In these questions, we are led to consider the divine character, not in general, but as it addresses our human predicament.

What we discover first about the character of God is that he is angry. Consider question 10. "*Will God permit such disobedience and rebellion to go unpunished?*" The

answer: “*Certainly not. He is terribly angry about the sin we are born with as well as the sins we personally commit. As a just judge he punishes them now and in eternity. He has declared, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.’*”

We would prefer to talk about the love of God. Part of my own daily spiritual discipline is to go over a list of about 30 passages that declare the love of God. Ask anyone inside and outside the church what God is like and a good majority will tell you that God is love. And he is. As Moses declares to Israel, “*The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, showing love to thousands...*” (Exodus 34:6). Paul tells the believers in Ephesus that God “*in love predestined us to be adopted into sonship...*” (Ephesians 1:5).

Unlike the generic spirituality of pop culture which conceives of divine love as nice feelings for everyone, the Scriptures present us with a picture of the love of God that is full of character and a great deal more than nice feelings. Moses continues his description of God’s character, “*He does not leave the guilty unpunished.*” Exodus 34:7. Paul tells the Ephesians that due to sin, by nature we are all “*deserving of wrath*” Ephesians 2:3. In short, the love of God and the anger of God go hand in hand. Or as I have heard recently, the love of God is one side of his hand, the anger of God the other side.

It is ironic that the anger of God dropped out of favor in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Paul Johnson in his *History of Modern Times*, there were more people killed due to war in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than all other centuries combined. Not only was the 20<sup>th</sup> century a century filled with war, but Auschwitz, the gulags of the Stalinist era and the killing fields of Cambodia show the presence of evil heretofore not experienced in the history of the human race. 9/11 and the state of world wide terror as we begin the 21<sup>st</sup> century doesn’t offer hope that things are going to improve any time soon.

Susan Nieman, in the book *Evil in Modern Times*, says that the basic philosophical struggle is this; how do we explain that “*the world is not as it ought to be.*” I think she is right. This awareness that the world is not right leads to a number of questions about life and about God. Both theology and philosophy address this problem, but from different angles. The basic theological question is this: “How could the Creator, a loving Creator, not be angry at the state of this world?”

Let’s take this another step. Not only is the world, “*not the way it is supposed to be;*” neither you nor I “*are the way we are supposed to be.*” We don’t even live up to our personal expectations, much less to the expectations of others or God. Surely this means that the love of God has serious consequences for our relationship with him. C.S. Lewis writes, “Watch out. You want a loving God, you got one!” God’s love demands that he won’t leave us as we are.

In light of the loving righteous anger of God, the Heidelberg leads us to consider the character of Jesus Christ, questions 15, 16, 17 and 18. Question 15 is the pivotal question: “*What kind of mediator and deliverer should we look for?*” Answer: “*One who is truly human and truly righteous, and yet more powerful than creatures, that is, one who is also true God.*”

The person and work of Jesus Christ will be considered in more depth later on in the Heidelberg. In questions 29-62 it expounds the articles of the Apostles’ Creed as it relates to Jesus Christ. However in these questions we are currently considering, what we are to understand is this: it is essential to our eternal predicament that Jesus Christ be both human and divine.

Although taught in the Scriptures, we have Athanasius and the monastic communities of the fourth century to thank for this article of faith and the consequent survival of Christianity. When it looked like the entire church was embracing the Arian belief that Jesus was a created being somewhat higher than the angels, Athanasius endured persecution, exile, imprisonment, and death threats for almost 70 years. When chased by the authorities, Athanasius was kept safe in desolate desert communities that were growing up along the edges of civilization in the decaying classical world. Athanasius and the praying communities stood firm against the massive weight of ecclesiastical and imperial pressure (“*Athanasius contra mundi*” became the popular expression) to maintain that Jesus was at the same time, both God and human.

Athanasius knew that if Jesus is not human, his death would have been meaningless in satisfying (the theological term is “propitiating”) the wrath of God. He also knew that if Jesus is not God then his death on a Roman cross makes no more difference than any other person who ever died by that gruesome means of execution.

## Scripture Study

1. Read Exodus 34: 6, 7, Deuteronomy 7:9, 10 and Isaiah 54:8. Based on these verses, what would you have to say to someone who had never heard of God as he is revealed in the Scriptures?
2. Read Roman 1:18-32. What is God angry about?
3. Why is it a good thing that God is able to be, and is, angry?
4. How do you see the anger of God present in the world today?
5. How have you experienced the love of God?
6. Look up the following verses: Ps 33:5; Ps 62:11,12; Ps. 106:1; Ps 145:8, 13, 17; Jeremiah 31:3, Zeph 3:17; John 3:16; John 13:33; Romans 5:5; Romans 8:35-39; Ephesians 2:4, 5; Ephesians 3:14-20; Ephesians 5:1, 2; I John 4:10; Revelation 1:6. What do you learn about the love of God?
7. How is love of God similar to human love? How is it different?
8. How have you been experiencing the love of God in Jesus Christ in your present circumstances?

9. Read Revelation 5:9-14. How might these verses bring together all the themes we have been considering in questions 10-19 of the Catechism?

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The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Rev. Susan Cyre is Executive Director and Editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes 12 people, clergy and lay, women and men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the PC(USA)'s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian world view. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it.

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