

What Is the Reformed Faith?

High Points

of

Calvinism

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Introduction

1. Relation to *What Is the OPC?*

The companion booklet *What Is the OPC?* provides basic information about the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, including its history, doctrine, and ministries. The descriptive adjective “Reformed” occurs throughout that booklet, but is not fully defined. Basically, when we speak of the Reformed faith, we refer to the true Christian religion as it was recovered during the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In this booklet, we have selected those doctrines and that methodology which position the OPC as a Reformed church. Consequently, the reader will not find here a treatment of those cardinal articles of the Christian religion that Reformed churches hold in common with other churches, such as the Trinity, the atonement, justification by faith, the virgin birth and bodily resurrection of Jesus, his miracles, and the inspiration of Holy Scripture. The Reformed faith holds to all the apostolic doctrines set forth in the Bible and given credal formulation by the great ecumenical councils of the ancient church.

It is important to recognize that these doctrines have been variously misinterpreted by the several branches of the visible church. Which interpretations belong to the Reformed faith, and which do not? The answer to that question can only be gained through a careful study of the Reformed creeds, confessions, and catechisms—many quotations from which will be encountered throughout this study.

Any adequate definition of the Reformed faith must focus on doctrine. Nonetheless, merely “buying into” some abstract body of truth does not qualify an individual or a church as “Reformed.” Rather, the Reformed faith is a relationship to God, through Jesus Christ, based upon the gospel revealed by him and in Holy Scripture.

The contents of this booklet are selective, and are not comprehensive of the Christian faith. An exhaustive summary of the Reformed faith is neither intended nor supplied. Finally, this booklet is not to be taken as an official statement of the doctrine and practice of the OPC. For such, the reader is directed to our Confession of Faith, Catechisms, and *The Book of Church Order*.

2. The Reformed Faith as the Most Consistent Form of Christianity

The Reformed faith is the Christian religion in its most consistent expression. This is not to claim that others, who do not hold to the Reformed confessions, are not Christians. It is simply to insist that there is only one true religion and that the most consistent expression of it is the Reformed faith. Jesus himself said, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matt. 7:13–14). No doubt some see this way more clearly than others. And Jesus does not say that none but the consistent will be able to enter in. But how clear it is that there is only one way!

Furthermore, Jesus plainly insisted that this one way of salvation be taught consistently: “Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age’ ” (Matt. 28:18–20).

Consistent and faithful maintenance of the entire content of the true religion is a matter of no little importance. We are not to judge just how much a particular sinner must know in order to be saved. But there is no doubt as to the church’s task in this world: to uphold the whole of Christ’s word in faithful and consistent teaching.

Part I:

Reformed Principles

1. Bible-Based

The Reformed faith takes the Bible with the utmost seriousness. It is but another way of saying that “from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen” (Rom. 11:36). The Reformed faith seeks to maintain the entire teaching of the Bible, rightly understood. Space considerations prevent us from developing the distinctive emphases of the Reformed faith at any great length. But we hope that through even this brief survey the reader will: (1) see that there is a profound difference between the Reformed faith and all other less consistent formulations of the Christian faith, and (2) be challenged to investigate with open mind our claim that this Reformed faith is nothing more or less than the teaching of the Bible consistently expressed.

a. Sufficiency

The Reformed faith finds its entire authority in the teaching of the Word of God. The Bible is the only infallible rule of what we are to believe and how we are to live. Continuing charismatic revelations, prophecies, or unknown tongues are no longer needed because God has spoken his final and all-sufficient word with the completion of the canon of Holy Scripture. The Bible and the Bible alone—that is our confession!

b. Necessity

The Bible is the revelation of God’s person and will. “Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deut. 8:3). But people naturally try to live without that Word; they attempt to live by their own lights (cf. Ps. 36:1–4). The truth, however, is that no man can live without the light of God’s special revelation.

This was true for the first created man, Adam, even before he fell into sin by denying God’s light and disobeying him. Adam, though created perfect and with the work of God’s law inscribed upon his heart, still needed outside light to shine upon him to enable him to walk according to God’s commands. Adam still needed God to talk to him. He knew much, by virtue of his constitution in the divine image, yet he still needed the divine voice. And so do all of Adam’s descendants, whether or not they like to hear it. In Romans 1:21, the apostle Paul makes the startling announcement that by nature everyone knows about God’s existence and power because of his work in the created universe, and yet rejects and despises that light which they have.

Since the fall of mankind, the human will has been grossly perverted. Each of us, apart from God’s saving activity, wants to go his or her own way, rather than God’s way. That way, expressed in God’s law, is part of the inner fabric of our being. No one can escape conscience, which generates a constant activity of accusing or excusing. But the bottom line is that, apart from the regenerating work of God, we all hate the holy law of God because we are children of fallen Adam (cf. John 3:19–20).

Consequently, our only hope is the gospel. After declaring that men love the darkness, Jesus said: “But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God” (John 3:21). The Holy Scripture is “most necessary” because through it alone comes “that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation” (Westminster Confession of Faith [WCF], I:1).

Christians need the Bible too. Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples” (John 8:31). How will we know that teaching unless we have light upon our path? Believers show themselves to be happy receivers of God’s grace by obeying his word and walking in his light.

c. Inerrancy

The Bible is free from error as it sprung from the hand of God. The Psalmist says as much: “The law of the LORD is perfect.... The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy.... The precepts of the LORD are right.... The fear [i.e., the object of reverence, namely, the Word of God] of the LORD is pure” (19:7–9). That last characteristic means “free from defect.” Did we think that it would be otherwise, since it is the breath of God? (Cf. 2 Tim. 3:16, “All Scripture is God-breathed,” and 2 Pet. 1:21, “For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit”—the Greek verb for “carry along” sometimes describes the effect that the wind has upon a sailing vessel.)

The Bible didn’t drop out of heaven all nicely bound. Men wrote, but in their writing, with all its variety of vocabulary and style, the Holy Spirit, by his working and his speech, was determining the resulting word. The human authors were carried along under his power, ensuring that the product would be free from defect. Consequently, as the Reformed faith insists, the Bible is infallible and absolutely trustworthy.

d. Clarity

The Bible is clear; this is a fruit of its inerrancy. Psalm 19:8 states, “The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.” The analogy here is of a faultless gem: pure, unmixed with conflicting material. The Bible wouldn’t be clear if it were a mixture of truth and error.

This does not mean that everything in the Bible is equally fathomable. There are doctrines in Holy Scripture that boggle the mind. We know what the doctrine of the Trinity doesn’t mean (the early church spent hundreds of years ruling out the “explanations”!). We know how the Bible frames it: there is one God; this one God exists in three Persons; each Person is distinct. Reformed believers do not claim that they can fathom that. But they do firmly believe it. There is no need for “experts” to guide us through “the murky depths.” For, as our Confession says: “All things in Scripture are not alike ... clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known ... for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them” (WCF, I:7).

2. God-Centered

a. His Glory

The Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC) takes its initial grasp of the seamless robe of Christian truth by affirming that “man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever” (Q. 1). In this, it certainly reflects Holy Scripture: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31); “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you” (Ps. 73:25).

Glorifying God, or seeking the glory of God, is indeed a very central concept in the Christian faith. Yet, like many familiar words and phrases, it does not admit of easy explanation. Nevertheless, it is important that we have a good, biblical notion of what it means, because it takes us to the very heart of our faith and, indeed, of what God wants us to know and do. Notice that the Catechism does not pause to prove the truth that it explains; it begins by stating at once in the broadest terms that God is, and that we owe him heartfelt and lavish glory and praise.

What we believe and say about God himself is the beginning and ending of all truth and morality. Asaph, in Psalm 73, confesses that his trouble only increased as he moved away from a humble acknowledgment of the truth of all truths: God is. Yahweh, the name by which he revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush, means “I am.” The theologians have a special word for this mind-boggling attribute of the God who is there; they speak of it as his “aseity.” He just is, by himself, and independent of all else.

Note the progression in Asaph’s experience. His temptation was to view the world apart from God, with the wicked (vss. 3–11). His thinking amounted to practical atheism (vss. 12–14). His whole life, body and spirit, was understandably devastated (vss. 4, 16, 21, 22). Thus, his healing would necessarily involve a new and humble embrace of God’s person, like Job’s experience (vss. 17–20).

God is glorious in himself, apart from his entire creation. He has glory in himself. It is his own glory, and it is total, complete, and perfect. In fact, God was revealed to Israel as “the God of glory” (Ps. 29:3). Glory is what makes him God—he cannot be God without it. The Hebrew word is *shekinah*—which refers to the radiant splendor of his person, the shining of his being. Remember the pillar of bright cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night? It was a manifestation of his beauty, his wonderfulness. All words fail us—all we can say is that God is glorious.

God will not give his glory to anyone else; it belongs to him alone! Because he is so wonderful, he deserves our constant praise and worship. The Reformed faith confesses such, and insists that the glory we are to give God is nothing else but lifting up his name, magnifying him, and consciously acknowledging his perfection.

b. His Triune Salvation

But how can we, who are dead in our trespasses and sins, attain to this high and worthy objective? The answer is found in the fact that the true God—the God of the Bible, who is triune—has become our Savior.

In emphasizing that it is the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who saves us, the Reformed faith clearly stands in the mainstream of the historic Christian faith. Consult, for example, the ancient Apostles’ Creed—the earliest Christian confession. In it you will find three sections, each beginning with an expression of faith in one of the three persons of the Trinity: “*God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth ... Jesus*

Christ, his only Son, our Lord ... [and] *the Holy Spirit*.” In the sections that immediately follow, we briefly summarize the saving work of the three persons of the Godhead.

(1) Total Depravity—Man in his natural state is dead in trespasses and sins.

It is the ancient conviction of the Christian church that man—being dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1, 5)—cannot save himself. Yet how often man has tried to do something to bring about his own salvation! But Jesus said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). It is for this reason that the Bible says that God alone is the author of man’s conversion. Any man who hears the gospel is commanded by God to accept it. He is *free* to accept it. But—and this is the whole trouble—he is not *able* to accept it, because he does not have the holy desire or will to do so. “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil” (Jer. 13:23).

Man’s sinful nature, and this alone, makes it impossible for him to do anything to bring about his own salvation. As Jesus once said, “With man this is impossible ...” (Matt. 19:26). It is impossible for those who are dead in sin to receive Jesus Christ as he is freely offered in the gospel. How thankful we ought to be, then, that Jesus went on to say, “... but with God all things are possible.”

The Reformed faith teaches that man’s ability has suffered drastic change as a result of his fall into sin. He was originally both free *and able* to do the will of God. But “by his fall into a state of sin,” he has “*wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto*” (WCF, IX:3; italics added).

God did not take away from man the liberty to do good. So far as God is concerned, man is still *free* to do good. But he is not *able* to do good; in fact, he is “utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil” (WCF, VI:4). This is what the Scripture teaches, when it says, “The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so” (Rom. 8:7). *Man’s depravity*, in other words, *is total* by nature.

(2) Unconditional Election—God the Father has sovereignly chosen those who will be saved.

All Christians confess that God is sovereign. But it is of no value to *say* that God is supreme, unless we really *mean* it in the whole of our confession. But listen: “God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass” (WCF, III:1). And again: “God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least” (WCF, V:1). There is, in all this universe, no such thing as “fortune” or “chance.” This is teaching which says and means that God really is God. For, as the Scripture says, “He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: ‘What have you done?’ ” (Dan. 4:35). It is not merely that God can do his will, but that he actually does it—without any hindrance from anyone or anything.

Even with respect to the fall of man in Adam, and the eternal destiny of men and angels, the Reformed confession says that he is Lord of all. “By the decree of God, for

the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life; and others foreordained to everlasting death.... Their number [is] so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished" (WCF, III:3–4). But also let it be immediately observed that this same confession emphatically denies that God is the author of sin or that violence is offered to the will of the creatures by God's control of them (III:1). This seems contradictory, of course, for it seems that if God controls all things, then it must be his fault if men are condemned. But this is not the case. Scripture does not explain *how* God determines human destiny while yet the entire responsibility for sin belongs to us. It only teaches us *that* this is so. The difference between the Reformed faith and less consistent types of Christianity is that the Reformed faith does not argue or reason against the supremacy of God, nor against what the Bible clearly states.

It is an age-old objection to the doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty, that it cannot be held in an unqualified way without the denial of human liberty. For how, it is asked, can man be free if God controls everything? Many, when seeing this problem, immediately decide that God must not be absolutely sovereign after all. But this not only misrepresents God, but also misunderstands man. For man's freedom is very limited indeed. There are many things that he cannot do because of limitations of heredity, environment, family training, and opportunity. And every one of these limitations has been imposed by God. He is truly Lord of all, and "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:11). And—as we have already seen—man is also limited by his lost *ability*. So, it is not God's sovereignty that makes it impossible for man to do what needs to be done! No, it is man's own rebelling which has done this.

Go back to the ancient world before the Flood, and what do you see? You see the true picture of what man chooses by his own free will! But then you see one man and his family saved out of the ruin. But why was he saved? Was Noah better than other men? Was he good enough to choose God by his natural ability and inclination? If this had been the case, the Bible would not say that he "found grace" in God's eyes. It says that, because Noah did not deserve God's mercy any more than the others; God simply chose him. And why did God save Abram? His people worshiped "other gods" (Josh. 24:2), yet God called him out of Ur of the Chaldeans. God also made a further distinction between his descendants: he chose Isaac, not Ishmael, as heir of the promise. Then, to make it even more conclusive, he said to Isaac and Rebecca before their twin sons were born, "The older will serve the younger.' ... 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated' " (Rom. 9:12–13). He did it "in order that God's purpose in election might stand" (vs. 11), to make it clear that it does not "depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy" (vs. 16), and to show that "God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and hardens whom he wants to harden" (vs. 18). God is like a potter; out of one lump of clay he makes "some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use" (vs. 21). This is unconditional election. It simply means that God ultimately decides who is going to be saved, and he does not choose them because of anything different in them.

And what is the common reaction to this awesome doctrine? Well, it goes something like this: "If I'm elect, I'll be saved no matter what I do. And if I'm not elect, it won't make any difference what I do because God won't accept me anyway." The natural man always wants to turn the tables and blame God instead of himself. But God's ways are not our ways. His sovereign election does not in any way destroy our responsibility.

If you fear you are not elect, your position is much like that of the lepers mentioned in 2 Kings 7:3–8. Jerusalem was under siege and people were dying of starvation; beyond the walls were the tents of the Arameans. Then one of these lepers said, “Why stay here until we die?... Let’s go over to the camp of the Arameans and surrender. If they spare us, we live; if they kill us, then we die.”

So it is with lost sinners and the gospel offer. If they sit where they are, they die; if they seek the Lord in repentance and faith, it cannot possibly make matters worse than they already are. Furthermore, Jesus said that no one who does this will ever be cast out (John 6:37). The truth is that the natural man hates the one thing that is needful: to be driven to his knees in utter self-despair and helplessness. Yet only such will ever be truly saved.

(3) Limited Atonement—The Lord Jesus died for all whom the Father had given to him, and for them only.

We are saved because God the Father has chosen us to be saved. But we are not saved by election alone. No, we are also saved through the atonement made by Jesus on the cross. For, as the Bible says, his name was called Jesus because he would “save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). If God the Father elected some to everlasting life, in other words, then it must follow that Christ died for them only and not for all men without distinction. This, too, is the teaching of the Reformed faith. The atonement is limited—not in its value, but only in those to whom it applies. The blood of Jesus is precious; it is of unlimited value. Nor would its value be exhausted if all men were in actuality saved by it. Yet there is a limitation placed upon the atonement of Jesus by the design of the Father: those who are actually saved by the blood of Jesus Christ are those alone whom it was the Father’s intention to save thereby.

Although the Bible clearly says that not everyone will be saved, some teach that it was God’s will to save all men without exception. This teaching is to be rejected because it suggests that God is not able to do what he intends to do. Others say that it was not God’s will fully to save anyone. They say that he intended only to save all men in part, leaving the other part to be performed by them. This teaching, likewise, is to be rejected because in it Christ is not the sole savior—he must share that glory with the sinner himself!

The Reformed faith, echoing Scripture, teaches that only some people will actually be saved. It also teaches that God alone saves sinners, and so it teaches that those who are saved are those whom God intended to save. As Jesus said to the Father, speaking of himself: “For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him” (John 17:2). And, “I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:15).

We are well aware that this doctrine offends man’s natural reason. It has long been said, against this doctrine, that it restricts the hope of eternal life to only a few. Some even say that if this doctrine were true, there would be no point to preaching the gospel, since Christ’s death was not intended to save many who hear it. Thus, they are quite willing to reduce God’s glory in order to increase man’s “chances,” as they see it. They prefer to say that God intended the death of Christ for all, in order to give every man a chance by leaving the final decision with him!

How foolish this is; it sacrifices much and gains nothing. By saying that God merely wants all men to be saved, how many more are actually saved? The answer is: none! For even those who work on such a theory admit that many will be lost, as the Bible teaches. This compromise only seems to give men a better “chance,” but it does not really do so.

On the Reformed view, how many less are saved? The answer is: none. For the Bible itself teaches us that God will save “a great multitude that no one could count” (Rev. 7:9). And who, by this fact, is given any less opportunity to be saved? The answer again is: none. For no man can know—until he dies in unbelief—that he is not elect, for the simple reason that God has not revealed such information to any unbeliever. Yet those who do come to God through Jesus discover that he did die for them in particular. They can then say with Paul that the Son of God “loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

(4) Irresistible Grace—The Holy Spirit sovereignly and effectually applies salvation to the elect.

If men were left to depend upon their own strength and ability at any point in the process of salvation, none could be saved. But such is not the case. The Reformed faith teaches that which Jesus prayed: “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (John 6:37), and that which Jesus affirmed: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (vs. 44). And it is here that we see the saving work of the Holy Spirit.

The triune God actually saves his elect people by “enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, by his almighty power, determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace” (WCF, X:1). And let it be carefully noted that “this effectual call is of God’s free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it” (sec. 2).

All sinners who hear the gospel are commanded to repent and believe. But this they cannot do, because they are dead in trespasses and sins. Then God, through the operation of the Holy Spirit, creates within his elect the power to do what he commands. Just as it was impossible that dead Lazarus should hear the voice of Jesus and come forth from the grave, and yet *did* hear and come forth because the one who called him forth also gave him power to hear and obey, so it is with our conversion. No wonder the apostle Paul asked, “For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Cor. 4:7).

The divine and sovereign act of regeneration effected by the Holy Spirit precedes the human activity of repentance and faith. This clear teaching upholds both the undivided glory of God and the responsibility of man. Some have imagined that if regeneration is only possible by a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, then someone might sincerely desire to be saved and yet have no “chance” of salvation. But the truth is that no one has ever desired to be saved in God’s way, without this prior work of regenerating grace: “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

Others have thought that if God converts the sinner, there is no need for the sinner to obey the commands of the gospel by repenting and believing in Christ. But again, the

truth is otherwise. For the only way that we can know that God's grace has been given to us, is by being willing to heed the Lord's commands. "We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands" (1 John 2:3). Everyone who answers the call of God's grace from the heart has, in that very act, the only evidence there is of the grace that has been given. As Peter said: "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness" (2 Pet. 1:3). All who refuse to obey the gospel have only themselves to blame; all who come to Christ have only God to praise.

(5) Perseverance of the Saints—Those who are truly saved will never be lost.

As we have now seen, the Reformed faith has a much more exalted view of God and a much lower view of man than is commonly held by men. No doubt this is why the natural man cannot receive the Reformed faith, while he can often agree with easier, more "acceptable" forms of Christian teaching. No doubt this is also why Jesus said to Peter, when he first accepted such teaching, "This was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Matt. 16:17). Nothing but the mighty and sovereign grace of God can bring man to accept it.

But we must not imagine that the Reformed believer is the poorer for this fact, because the benefit is far greater than the cost. For if it costs sinful man the admission that he is helpless, that puts him in possession of an incomparable blessing: "They, whom God hath accepted in his Beloved ... can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved" (WCF, XVII:1). They cannot fall from grace because God brings the work of salvation to perfection in them that are his. And this is true in spite of the mere appearance (but not the reality) of grace in hypocrites and the remaining tendencies to sin in genuine believers.

Now, as everyone knows, there are those who appear to fall away from grace. They seem to have faith in Christ, but then lose all interest in him. How then, it may be asked, can we be sure that all those who are chosen by Christ will persevere in faith? The answer is found in the Bible: "They went out from us," says John, "but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us" (1 John 2:19).

If men could be saved by God, only to be lost again because of themselves, then God would be a failure! It even seems that this does happen. But it does not really happen at all, because "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion" (Phil. 1:6). All those who really belong to him "through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet. 1:5). This is wholly due to God's power, and not to any strength coming from the believer himself; even true believers can do nothing by themselves.

There is, by the creating and sustaining grace of God, an unquenchable faith in, and desire for, God in the heart of every true believer, who is encouraged and enabled to fight the good fight of the faith, enduring even to the end. How could God be God if he did not perfect that good work which he himself has begun in us?

3. Covenantally Ordered

a. The Covenants

By *covenant* we understand that “voluntary condescension on God’s part” (WCF, VII:1) by which he (the Creator) enables man (his creature) to obey, glorify, and enjoy him. The Westminster Confession of Faith identifies two covenants:

1. The covenant of works—“The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience” (VII:2). Adam, constituted by God the federal head of the entire human race, broke that covenant. He and all mankind sinned and fell by transgressing God’s command. It became impossible that any descendant of Adam by ordinary generation after that could enjoy eternal life. Every last person, unless God should intervene, was dead in sin, condemned, and destined for everlasting punishment.

2. The covenant of grace—God did intervene! “God, having out of his mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a covenant of grace to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer” (WSC, Q. 20).

The Reformed faith insists that there is one, and only one, way of salvation—through that Redeemer, Jesus Christ. All who are brought into that estate of salvation, from Adam to the last person born upon this earth, enter it through that covenant of grace. The most basic division in the Bible is not between the Old and New Testaments (as dispensationalists affirm), but between Genesis 1:1–3:6 and the rest of the Bible. Upon the field of that broken covenant of works, God enters with a gracious covenant of salvation for Old and New Testament saints together.

There is one church of the ages. True, that one church has existed both in the age of promise (the Old Testament) and in the age of fulfillment (the New Testament). “There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations” (WCF, VII:6). That one church has one mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ. As the Word of God come in the flesh, he is its prophet. As the bearer of sin and the perfect obeyer of God, he is its priest. As the ruler and defender of God’s church, he is its king.

b. Covenant and the Church

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church is apostolic. No, we do not continue the office of the apostles, but we do endeavor in every way to continue in the apostolic doctrine and practice of the New Testament churches (Acts 2:42). We believe that by God’s grace we are included in the number of those with whom God has entered into a covenant of grace through his son Jesus Christ, in whom all the foreshadowings and promises of the Old Testament are fulfilled (WCF, VII:5; 2 Cor. 1:20).

Therefore, we quite naturally view ourselves and our baptized children as one with the people of God in all ages, heirs of the special relationship that God established long ago with Abraham (Gal. 3:15–27; Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:37–39), who is the father of all true believers. And, with the chosen covenant community of all ages, our Reformed faith places strong emphasis on church membership and attendance in the life of the children of God (WCF, XXX:2).

We do not call the Orthodox Presbyterian Church a true church of Christ because we believe ourselves to be the only Christians in the United States. Rather, we do so because we magnify the grace of God, which has constituted us a denomination where (however imperfectly) all things are managed according to the pure word of Christ, who is alone

the Head and King of the church. Jesus tells us that his flock hears his voice and follows him, and that they will simply not listen to the voice of a stranger. With praise to God, therefore, we rejoice that by the unmerited mercy of God we also are members of this flock that hears the voice of the Good Shepherd.

c. Infant Baptism

“Baptism is a sacrament, wherein the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, doth signify and seal our engrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord’s” (WSC, Q. 94). Baptism is the sign of the covenant of grace during the New Testament age, as circumcision was during the Old (cf. Col. 2:11–12).

Reformed Christians understand that baptism is to be applied, therefore, to all those with whom God has established the covenant of grace, namely, to believers in Christ together with their children. It is important to stress that there is not one Bible text explicitly commanding infant baptism. If there were, all Bible-believing churches would practice it. However, God’s will not only is “expressly set down in Scripture,” but also “by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture” (WCF, I:6).

The argument for infant baptism may be expressed in the form of a syllogism:

1. Major premise—all participants in the covenant of grace ought to receive the sign of the covenant of grace.
2. Minor premise—the infant children of believers are participants in the covenant of grace.
3. Conclusion—the infant children of believers ought to receive the sign of the covenant of grace.

If both premises are true, the conclusion is inescapable. That is what the Confession means by “good and necessary consequence.” The only way to avoid baptizing the infant children of believers is to deny at least one premise.

Few would deny the major premise, but dispensationalists clearly deny the minor premise. They affirm that the infant children of believers have never been participants in the covenant of grace. Once, during the Old Testament age, they participated in the nation of Israel and received the sign of that participation—circumcision. But, they say, children are not participants in the covenant of grace, for that exists only in the New Testament age. Since there is no New Testament text commanding the baptism of children, they don’t do it.

However, the covenant of grace has existed in both ages, and the infant children of believers were clearly participants in it during the Old Testament age. God required it (see Gen. 17:10). Now, since God does not alter his covenant (cf. Ps. 89:34), we are not surprised that there is no New Testament text indicating that whereas infant children of believers once were participants, they now no longer are. On the contrary, Colossians 2:11–12 specifically relates baptism to circumcision; those who were circumcised are now to be baptized. And Acts 8:12 shows that the new sign of the covenant was applied to women as well as to men.

Baptism is an entirely passive sacrament, from our perspective. This does not mean that at all points in the application of the salvation promised in the covenant of grace the individual baptized is entirely passive. He or she is quite active in conversion and in sanctification. Rather, it means that an individual is baptized—one does not baptize

oneself. Parents don't baptize their children. Strictly speaking, not even the minister (or the church, for that matter) baptizes them, in the sense of effecting something. We do not do anything in baptism; rather, God does something. He, through the church's fulfillment of his command, identifies the children, young and old, of his covenant family, the objects of his covenant of grace and of all its stupendous blessings.

d. All of Life Redeemed

The places of service in which Reformed people are actively involved are not limited to the church alone. This is because our Reformed faith teaches us that Jesus Christ is king of the whole world and over every area of life (WCF, XIX:5; XXIII:1–4). Reformed believers therefore actively subject the entire created order to the lordship of Christ.

Secular humanism has become a major enemy of the church in our day. This enemy has captured the corridors of power and influence in our country, in which there once was a benign Christian influence. To combat the secularization of America, Reformed believers are active in the fields of politics, education, economics, law, science, labor, etc.—ready to take up the cause of Christ, whatever the sphere of life might be.

From writing members of Congress to opposing abortion, from diaconal disaster relief for the poor to crisis counseling of broken families and abused children, Reformed people believe their faith is relevant to the transformation of all of life into blessed conformity to the standards of God's justice and morality. Yes, there should be liberty and justice for all—as defined by God, not by man!

Part II: Reformed Practice

1. The Law of God

According to *Time* magazine, there is a school district in the United States where teachers are forbidden to tell their students that it is morally wrong to steal. Yes, they may tell them that they will have to suffer consequences if they steal, because our society has so decided. But they may not press the ethical judgment that such behavior is evil. So much for alleged neutrality! The fact is, however, that everybody acts upon one basis or another. Either there is a Creator God who has declared his will for his creature, man, or there is not. Actually, the above-mentioned school district is quite consistent, not with neutrality, but with the view that man is autonomous. Once you rule out God and rule in man as the supreme authority over behavior, then of course you will look very unkindly upon one person pressing his or her individual opinions about what is right and wrong upon others.

The Reformed faith insists upon God's supreme authority. "The duty which God requireth of man, is obedience to his revealed will" (WSC, Q. 39). That revealed will (the moral law) is "summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments" (WSC, Q. 41), which are found in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. It is not difficult to relate all of the commands in the Bible to one or more of the Ten Commandments (cf. Matt. 5:17–48). That moral law is binding upon all men for all time. Prior to our conversion, it "was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith" (Gal. 3:24). That is, it revealed our sin and need of a Savior. After conversion, it is a rule of gratitude for the covenant people of God in their thankful service to their Deliverer.

Besides this perpetually binding moral law, God gave his church other laws, for a time. The Old Testament ceremonial laws, prefiguring Christ, "are now abrogated, under the new testament" (WCF, XIX:3). Judicial laws, directing national Israel, "expired together with the state of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require" (sec. 4).

2. Principles of Conduct

The Reformed faith insists upon the binding authority of the entirety of the moral law:

Commandment 1—Whom to Worship. This commandment teaches that there is only one living and true God, the triune God of the Bible. We are forbidden to worship any god but him.

Commandment 2—How to Worship. We are to worship God using only those specific aspects of worship commanded in his Word. We are not to worship God through things made by men's hands, including images, crucifixes, altars, or any other ways not prescribed in Scripture.

Commandment 3—Reverence. God reveals himself through his name. God’s names describe his character. We pervert God’s intention for his name when we use it in blasphemy, cursing, and swearing. God forbids using his name lightly.

Commandment 4—Rest [see below].

Commandment 5—The Home. This commandment delegates to Christian parents the authority and the duty to govern their children.

Commandment 6—Life [see below].

Commandment 7—Purity [see below].

Commandment 8—Property. As the ultimate owner of all, God has entrusted us as stewards with his created resources. Therefore, we must gain and use material possessions according to his rules.

Commandment 9—The Tongue. God is a God of truth. He requires his children always to speak the truth. Christians must therefore hate all lies, in whatever form they appear.

Commandment 10—The Heart. We are not to be discontent, envious, or jealous of the reputation or possessions of our neighbor. Covet most of all the riches of God’s grace.

(This summary is taken from *Confessing Christ*, by C. K. Cummings, pp. 46–53.)

Although each commandment merits a fuller treatment, we have elected to treat three more fully:

a. Labor and the Sabbath Ordinance—the Fourth Commandment

The OPC is a confessional church, teaching what some have called a “Puritan” (or even “pharisaical”) view of the Sabbath (see Ex. 20:8–11). In Israel it was forbidden even to kindle a fire on the Sabbath (Ex. 35:3). Sabbath work was punishable by death (Ex. 35:2). But similar sanctions were demanded for cursing father or mother (Ex. 21:17; Lev. 20:9), and for adultery (Lev. 20:10). Civil authorities do not exact such punishment today. How does this diminish what God requires by way of obedience to his law? Christ did not come to lower God’s standard (Matt. 5), but to uphold it. Strict observance of this law is no more properly designated “pharisaism” than strict observance of any other law of God.

Our standards teach what could be called an unattainable Sabbath! The “Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men . . . not only observe an holy rest, all the day, from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations, but also are taken up, the whole time, in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy” (WCF, XXI:8). Is it not self evident that no one can do this perfectly? But that is also true of the other commandments. God’s law was not given to make us feel good, but to show us our need of Christ—not only at the beginning, but all the way through the Christian life. Isn’t that what the Bible itself says we ought to learn from the law? “Your commands are boundless” (Ps. 119:96).

b. The Sanctity of Life—the Sixth Commandment

The sixth commandment enjoins us, “You shall not murder” (Ex. 20:13). God has life in himself; he himself is the source of all life. Human life reflects him particularly—“So God created man in his own image” (Gen. 1:27). Murder is not only contrary to God’s will, but also an attack upon him. This needs to be emphasized, particularly in this day of

voluntary abortion, which, if not done to preserve the life of the mother, is nothing short of murder.

In the covenant that God made with Noah (and with “every living creature with” Noah—Gen. 9:12), capital punishment was prescribed for the murderer: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed” (Gen. 9:6). So highly does God value human life that, later, he established cities of refuge in Israel for the protection of the person wrongly accused of murder (Num. 35:6–28).

The faithful imposition of capital punishment for premeditated murder can be expected to deter this horrendous act, but when the civil magistrate fails to obey this command of the living God, violence abounds. The Preacher warned that this would occur: “When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong” (Eccl. 8:11).

c. Marriage—the Seventh Commandment

The seventh commandment requires: “You shall not commit adultery” (Ex. 20:14). This prohibition underlines God’s will regarding that most basic of all human relationships, marriage. In the Garden of Eden, the Lord said: “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” (Gen. 2:18). God’s purpose for Adam was not complete until Eve was on the scene. Celibacy, though appropriate for some people, is the exception that proves the rule, as Jesus said: “Not everyone can accept [celibacy], but only those to whom it has been given” (Matt. 19:11). Marriage is to be between one man and one woman; the Bible calls homosexuality sin (Rom. 1:26–27).

There is a divinely imposed structure to marriage. Each partner has a distinctive role: the husband is the head in the marriage unit and the wife is the helper placed under her husband (Eph. 5:22–24). The husband is commanded to love his wife, and the wife is commanded to respect her husband (vs. 33). This relationship predated the Fall (Gen. 2:20b–24), was affected by the Fall (Gen. 3:16), and is blessed by redemption in Christ (Eph. 5:22–33).

3. Evangelism

Jesus’ last words to his disciples, before he ascended into heaven, were: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). As someone has rightly said, the duty of the whole church is to proclaim the whole gospel to the whole world. It is a great commission indeed!

By Matthew’s account, this proclamation of the gospel is not bare preaching, but includes “mak[ing] disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19–20). Thus, the church is to: (1) make disciples—identify and gather in all those from every nation under heaven who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, believe and follow Jesus as their Savior and King, (2) baptize—apply the new covenant sign of membership in this covenantal band to both the disciples and their children; and (3) teach—catechize (instruct) them, young and old, in the apostolic faith.

Part III: Reformed Church Government

1. The Corporate Nature of the Church

Believers belong to their Lord. But, because there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:5–6), believers belong to each other. Consequently, they are called to mutual encouragement and discipline as members together.

It is sometimes said that “it doesn’t matter what church you belong to as long as you believe.” Like many slogans, this one contains an element of truth, but also considerable error. Personal faith is indeed important, but it is not the only important thing; it also matters what church you belong to. Churches do not just happen to divide into different denominations; they split as a consequence of unfaithfulness.

Consider the history of the divided kingdom in Israel: Solomon contributed to this division by compromising with pagan religions, and, after he died, division came. Ten tribes rebelled against Rehoboam to follow Jeroboam. Rehoboam considered using force to restore unity, but God forbade it (1 Kings 12:22–24). Jeroboam, fearing his people’s return to Rehoboam because of the divinely instituted worship in Jerusalem, set up rival worship, appointing non-Levitical priests and setting up golden calves in Dan and Bethel. Believers in Israel faced a momentous crisis, and they rightly left an unfaithful church to join a faithful one. God’s declaration confirms this: “He [God] will give Israel up because of the sins Jeroboam has committed and has caused Israel to commit” (1 Kings 14:16). When church leaders change a church’s official character, members are affected; they participate in apostasy merely by remaining members.

Did this mean that everyone in Israel was written off? No, but God’s prophets called them to separate from false worship. Many did, and migrated to Judah. Seven thousand refused to bow the knee to Baal. No doubt they were criticized for refusing to participate in “community worship services.” They probably knew many who participated while claiming to believe in the true God. But the point is that corporate responsibility does not allow the easy way out. Remaining in a false church is a sin which, if unforsaken, raises the question of the believability of one’s Christian commitment.

2. The Government of the Church

God creates, owns, and governs the church; it is his (cf. 1 Cor. 1:2, where Paul writes “to the church of God in Corinth”). That church of God really exists in the body of those who are united to Jesus Christ, and yet are found in many places. It is invisible in that it “consists of the whole number of the elect” (WCF, XXV:1), and it is visible in that it “consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children” (sec. 2).

It is also Christ’s church, as he prayed: “They were yours; you gave them to me” (John 17:6). He is its king and head (Col. 1:13, 18). As such, and for his church, the Lord

Jesus has “appointed a government, in the hand of church officers” (WCF, XXX:1). (All believers hold a general office, by virtue of their union with Christ.) The special officers are presbyters and deacons.

Presbyters (from the Greek word meaning “elder”) rule the church for Christ. There are two kinds of presbyters: (1) those who “direct the affairs of the church,” and (2) those “whose work is preaching and teaching” in addition to rule (1 Tim. 5:17). The former are usually called elders or ruling elders, and the latter, ministers. Together they constitute the session (the ruling body) of the local church. As shepherds, their task is to feed (Jude 12), guide (1 Pet. 5:2), and guard (Acts 20:28) the church which Christ purchased with his own blood. In so doing, they reflect and mediate the prophetic, priestly, and kingly activity of the church’s ascended Lord. For each local church, there will be a plurality of presbyters (Tit. 1:5). The session exercises its task by preaching, administering the sacraments, exercising discipline, instructing the congregation, visiting the members, and spreading the gospel through local, national, and foreign mission work. Elders remember that it is God’s flock they tend; the congregation belongs not to them, but to the Lord.

Deacons administer mercy, both to members of the congregation and to other believers (Acts 6:1–6), as well as to those outside the household of faith (Gal. 6:10). They serve in a special office of ministry, but they do not exercise rule over the congregation. All church officers are gifts of King Jesus to his church (Eph. 4:11), and as such must be qualified (1 Tim. 3:1–12; Tit. 1:6–9).

Through higher, or broader, assemblies (presbytery, regional synod, and general assembly) the unity of the church is expressed as administrative and judicial matters are handled corporately.

3. The Discipline of the Church

Because believers still sin, it is necessary that there be discipline in the church. Christ is the righteous King, and it is his will that the church practice righteousness. When church members persist in sin, not only are their immortal souls threatened, but the whole church is tempted thereby. Primarily, however, the honor of the church’s Head is assailed. Thus it is clear that discipline is good and necessary. Such discipline takes place (1) informally, as members confront, admonish, and exhort one another, and (2) formally, as official church discipline is administered by the session.

Informal church discipline is regulated by Christ’s prescription in Matthew 5:23–24 and 18:15–16, as well as the apostle Paul’s in Galatians 6:1–5. It may occur in private and, if repentance is forthcoming, need go no further, since the offender is restored. It is important to stress that informal discipline is discipline indeed, for sometimes it is thought that only formal church discipline is properly called discipline. Through both means, Christ sanctifies and preserves his church.

Formal church discipline is well summarized as follows: “To [church] officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed; by virtue whereof, they have power, respectively, to retain, and remit sins; to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the Word, and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the gospel; and by absolution from censures, as occasion shall require” (WCF, XXX:2). Presbyterian churches typically have a book of discipline that sets forth procedures by which this task is to be fulfilled both in the local church and on the presbytery (regional) and denominational (whole church) levels.

Discipline is one of the marks of the true church. Without it, even true preaching of the Word and right administration of the sacraments may not be expected to identify and preserve the church. It is necessary to stress this point, particularly since many organizations today attempt to retain the title of “church,” while forsaking its power (2 Tim. 3:5).

4. The Ecumenical Calling of the Church

There is more to the church of Christ, purchased with his own precious blood, than our denomination, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. The Bible speaks not only of churches, but also of the church (Eph. 4). And, ideally, there ought to be just one denomination that is faithful to the Word of God in doctrine and practice. There is only one body of Christ, one people of God, one church universal.

However, the church as we encounter it in this world is sadly divided. Some congregations that were once true churches have become synagogues of Satan, as our Confession says (WCF, XXV:5). Other congregations (and denominations) are sadly deformed, even though they are not (yet?) totally degenerate. And there are also true churches that are basically one in faith with us, and yet are divided from us for various reasons. Thus, one of the tasks that we see, as a church, is to strive as much as possible to overcome these sad divisions.

It is the strong conviction of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, however, that this does not mean that we should seek organizational unity where there is no unity in doctrine and practice. This is precisely the reason why we have never wanted to belong to the National—or World—Council of Churches. Those bodies may have organizational unity, but they do not have unity in the doctrine and practice required in the Bible.

At the same time, it has been the conviction of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church that we may not rest content with a “spiritual unity” that never comes to visible expression. It is for this reason that the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, over its entire denominational history, has sought to build and support organizations on the basis of essential agreement in doctrine and practice. It was for this reason that our church worked hard, for forty years, to keep the Reformed Ecumenical Synod faithful to the Scriptures, and then separated from that organization when it refused to maintain its own basis. This is also the reason why our church now belongs to the International Conference of Reformed Churches.

We will continue to seek visible unity with other churches, but only on the basis of a genuine adherence to the biblical confessions in doctrine and practice.

Part IV: Reformed Worship

1. Private and Family Worship

Private and family worship of God, particularly prayer and the reading of and meditating upon his Word, have been recognized by Reformed people as both proper and necessary. “God is to be worshiped everywhere, in spirit and truth; as, in private families daily, and in secret, each one by himself” (WCF, XXI:6; cf. Matt. 6:6; Deut. 6:6–7).

The private exercise of worship is an activity particularly appropriate on the Sabbath day (WCF, XXI:8). The believer’s sanctification is effected “really and personally, through the virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection, by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them” (XIII:1). The exercise of private prayer is so essential to the converted life that a rehearsal of its biblical basis should be required by none. Nevertheless, for our encouragement in obedience, the following should be noted: Pss. 32:5–6; 51:1–14; Matt. 6:6, 11.

Family worship is closely related to catechetical instruction. Psalm 78:1–8 lays a solemn obligation upon parents to teach their children the deeds and commands of their covenant God. The Westminster Assembly produced, along with its Confession of Faith and Catechisms, a Directory for Family Worship, recognizing the essential place of this discipline in covenant life. At the “family altar,” believing families not only learn the Word of God in the quiet of their own homes, but also engage in particular and pointed prayer, and raise songs of thankfulness to their Savior.

2. Corporate Worship

a. Regulation

Today there is a sense of uncertainty about worship. What really is pleasing to God, and what should be rejected? When people innovate in worship, how should we react? It is clear, from the great Reformed confessions, that the Reformed churches—in the fervor characterizing them in the beginning—were determined to worship God only as he prescribed, without any additions or subtractions.

Consider this statement of the principle: “The acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture” (WCF, XXI:1).

Not a few today are questioning how we should worship God. Is not the answer already implied when we say the Bible is the only infallible rule of our faith and practice? The principle—taught in both the Old and New Testaments—is summed up in these words of Moses: “Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you” (Deut. 4:2). This applies to all

of life, of course, and not only to worship. But nowhere else is it as vital to exclude every human invention as it is in this sphere.

Some churches today are returning to ceremonial worship. They call it liturgical revival. If they were serious in their claim to be biblical, they would go all the way, adopting the whole Old Testament system. They would even advocate rebuilding the Jerusalem temple. And, if they did, we could at least respect them for consistency. But, of course, these “weak and miserable” (Gal. 4:9) elements of Old Testament worship have no legitimate place in the new covenant church. We need no purple robes, candles, incense, dancing, or dramatic performance. Why? Because these shadowy representations only get in the way of the reality: the privilege of going each Lord’s Day—in faithful, commanded worship—right into the heavenly places (Heb. 12:18–29).

Are we, then, to do as we please—fashioning our own style of worship (while the Old Testament saints had to be careful)? No, we above all should abhor and shun all human inventions. Is this not what underlies the following warning? “See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused ... how much less will we...? Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire’ ” (Heb. 12: 25, 28–29).

Worship under the new covenant has been instituted by Jesus. Admittedly, there are few commands regarding, or examples of, corporate worship in the New Testament. The closest thing we have to a formal worship service is found in 1 Corinthians 14, and it focuses on speaking in tongues and prophecy, elements that were appropriate only in the apostolic age (cf. WCF, I:1). Nevertheless, we are able to identify prayer, the reading of the Scriptures, preaching, the singing of praise, the gathering of offerings, and the administration of the sacraments as “all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God” (WCF, XXI:5).

b. Singing of Praise

Worshippers praise their God and Savior in song. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly ... as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16). Our Directory for Worship states (3:6): “Since the metrical versions of the Psalms are based upon the Word of God, they ought to be used frequently in public worship”—but not exclusively. Hymns, both older and contemporary, are properly used in Orthodox Presbyterian congregations, but the session is responsible to select such carefully, for “great care must be taken that all the materials of song are in perfect accord with the teaching of Holy Scripture.” Orthodox Presbyterians not only preach, but pray and praise God in song, in the light of the entirety of God’s special revelation—both the dispensation of promise (the Old Testament) and that of fulfillment (the New Testament).

c. Preaching of the Word

The Word of God, which (together with the sacraments and prayer) are “the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption” (WSC, Q. 88), is indispensable to corporate worship. It must be read, for through it God speaks most directly to the congregation. It must be preached, being “an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation” (Q. 89).

Preaching is the proclamation of the Word of God, and the preacher, ordinarily a minister (teaching elder), is the herald of the gospel (2 Tim. 4:2; 1:11). His task is to proclaim Christ (Col. 1:28). He is concerned not with the approval of men, but with serving the Bread of Life to sinners.

The preaching of the Word of God is a specialized form of discourse, not to be confused with any other. It is, strictly speaking, neither a theological lecture nor a speech that seeks to persuade by moral suggestion, although it resembles both at certain points.

Preaching begins with a “what.” It must proclaim Christ in order to be called preaching. “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27) is what to preach. Here preaching is properly third-person discourse—the preacher points his listeners to Christ—who he is, and especially what great transactions of grace God the Father performed in him in order to save sinners.

Preachers are to preach Christ. But which Christ? Sometimes we hear people request “no creed but Christ.” Now, that may sound pious and even helpful, but it is not. The apostle continues, “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom” (Col. 1:28). Christ is not a mantra or some other mindless feeling; he is the one who asked the disciples, “Who do you say I am?” (Matt. 16:15). Their answer to that question would be their creed—it is inescapable.

But preaching is more than the “what.” It includes a “so what,” as well. The apostle says, “I labor, struggling with all his [Christ’s] energy, which so powerfully works in me” (Col. 1:29)—to what end? To “present everyone perfect in Christ” (vs. 28). He does that by admonishing—the verb means “to confront with a view to producing obedience”—his hearers. Knowledge of, and even belief in, the preached Word is absolutely indispensable, but a life of obedience to the commands of Christ is also indispensable. Preachers must press a “so what” upon their listeners, or they aren’t preaching. And here is where preaching is properly second-person discourse—the preacher calls forth a response to the heralded message: you must do what it says!

The preacher needs to lay both the doctrinal foundation and the ethical structure in every sermon. He is a herald; he has a message. But that message is not a compilation of interesting data; it is the heralding of wonderful, blessed, good news that must be both believed and acted upon.

d. The Lord’s Supper

The Reformed view of the Lord’s Supper needs to be distinguished from (1) the Roman Catholic Mass and (2) the memorial-only view held by many broadly evangelical churches.

The Lord’s Supper is not a Mass. “In this sacrament, Christ is not offered up to his Father; nor any real sacrifice made at all, for remission of sins . . .; but only a commemoration of that one offering up of himself, by himself, upon the cross, once for all” (WCF, XXIX:2). The Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, which maintains that the bread and wine of Communion are changed into the substance of Christ’s body and blood, is to be rejected entirely. Likewise to be rejected is the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation, which teaches the actual presence of Christ’s body “in, with, and under” the bread and wine of Communion.

The Lord’s Supper is not merely a memorial feast, either. “Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements, in this sacrament, do then also, inwardly by

faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally but spiritually, receive, and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death” (WCF, XXIX:7).

Christ is really present in the administration of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper—not physically, but spiritually. Believers feed upon, commune with, and receive grace from him in the sacrament. That is to say, they would deprive themselves of such blessing if they should absent themselves from the Lord’s Supper, even though they should seek him through other means, such as by the Word and prayer.

The Lord’s Supper is not for every covenant member, but is to be administered “only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves” (Westminster Larger Catechism, Q. 177; cf. 1 Cor. 11:28). Covenant children are urged to make public profession of faith in Christ, and thus be admitted to the Supper, as soon as they are so able.

The session is charged with maintaining the purity of the sacrament by admitting only worthy participants to it (1 Cor. 11:27–32). Members must not be permitted to commune if their membership privileges have been suspended or they refuse to be reconciled to a brother. Likewise, the Lord’s Supper must be fenced so as to exclude notorious sinners or casual visitors who make no profession of faith in Christ.

e. Simplicity

Reformed worship is beautiful, but it does not have the beauty of sensual things. Rather, it has the beauty mentioned in several of the psalms. “Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness” (Ps. 29:2).

It is for this reason that Reformed worship has always been marked by what some have called “a stark simplicity.” The beauty is found in the faithful preaching of the Word of God, in the simple, unadorned, but faithful administration of the sacraments, and in the maintenance of faithful discipline. Reformed people find their delight in truth and in the spiritual things that Christ spoke of when he said that we must worship God in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). Abraham Kuyper spoke of “the serious danger with which symbolism menaces the future of our Calvinistic Church life.” When “symbolism replaces revelation,” he said, it “makes us fall back from conscious to unconscious religion. The Reformed faith always places revelation in the foreground, and tolerates no other performances than such as are able to echo it and remain carefully under its sway.” This simplicity is a hallmark of the worship conducted in Reformed churches.

Conclusion

1. A Faithful Reformed Church

There would be no such thing as a Reformed church today if God had not sent the great Reformation. But the Reformation was not only a mighty work that came from God; it was also effected through men. That it was God's work did not make their work easy. It was the Reformers, therefore, who taught us to understand that the work of reforming the church is not finished. They said, "Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est": the church that is Reformed is always reforming.

A faithful Reformed church is therefore a church that is constantly striving to think and act, to believe and live, according to the written word of God. "The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error" (WCF, XXV:5). Also, some have degenerated horribly. It follows, then, that there is but one antidote to degeneration, namely, continued diligence. It is for this reason that the vows taken by ministers in the OPC include the promise "to be zealous and faithful in maintaining the truths of the gospel, and the purity, the peace, and the unity of the church, whatever persecution or opposition may arise unto you on that account" (Form of Government, XXIII).

2. The Doxologies of Revelation 4 and 5

The apostle John received a vision of the church worshiping God and saying:

You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created and have their being. (Rev. 4:11)

They fall down before the Lamb and sing this new song:

You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased men for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation.

You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth. (Rev. 5:9–10)

They are then joined by myriads of angels and the entire creation, singing:

To him who sits on the throne
and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power,
for ever and ever! (Rev. 5:13)

No words of our making could better summarize the heart of the Reformed faith than these divinely inspired doxologies. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever!" (Rom. 11:36).