

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Essentially Presbyterian

The essential tenets “guide the church in its study and interpretation of the Scriptures; they summarize the essence of Christian tradition; they direct the church in maintaining sound doctrines; they equip the church for its work of proclamation.” (G-2.0100(b) *Book of Order*). And as Presbyterians, every officer who is ordained and installed must respond “yes” to the question: “Do you 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?” (G-14.0405b (3), *Book of Order*, emphasis added). In order to honestly answer the question we must understand the Reformed faith and we must be able to enumerate the essential tenets. However, nowhere are the essentials expressly elucidated in the Presbyterian Church (USA) constitution as every General Assembly since 1926 that has been given the opportunity, has refused to say what they are.

What does ‘essential’ mean?

Absolutely necessary; vitally necessary; indispensable; basic and fundamental; all-important; of the greatest importance; being or relating to or containing the essence of; substantive; definitive; absolutely required and not to be sacrificed, denied or forfeited. *Sine quo non!* (without which the thing is not). We’re talking about the source material and defining foundations of our faith and our faith system.

Christian essentials are necessarily revelation *from* God and revelation *of* God and are about our relationship *with* God. The essentials come from God’s Word and bring glory to God. God gives us the essentials as foundations for our knowing and professing saving faith in Jesus Christ; and for our assurance in the Gospel and our growth in faith.

The essentials define and direct our faith profession, our spiritual growth, our discipleship and our witness (including our having disciplined and substantive faith, thought, witness and walk).

The essentials are central to our unity, they give us our “bearings,” our ministry direction, and our communion in the Church.

What’s ‘essential’ to faith?

1. Christians believe in God: one God in three persons, the Holy Trinity – God the Father; Jesus Christ, the Son of God; and the Holy Spirit of God.
2. Christians believe and affirm the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (the Bible) as God’s Word written.



3. Christians believe and affirm the Biblical witness regarding the human condition (originally created as righteous in God’s image, but now fallen, unrighteous and dead in sin, deserving of ultimate condemnation), and the good news regarding Jesus Christ as the incarnation of the eternal Word of God (fully God and fully human), the One Lord and Savior (atonement), and the One through whom we have victory over sin and death (resurrection and ascension). We believe that this salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.
4. Christians believe and affirm a covenant faith and covenant life in Christ.
5. Christians believe and affirm that the Church is the body of Christ and the communion of Christ with a mission in the world in and for the Gospel of Christ and the kingdom of God.

If you remove any one of these from a faith-system, can you still call it ‘Christian?’ No. In turn, if your faith system is not essentially Christian, it is certainly not essentially Reformed and therefore cannot be essentially Presbyterian. Therefore we will cover the essentials of the Christian faith from a Reformed perspective in order to establish an essential baseline.

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Week I: The Trinity

Question 1 of the Study Catechism of the PCUSA asks, “What is God’s purpose for my life?”

The answer expresses the vitality of life lived in relationship to the Trinitarian God. “God wills that I should live by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, for the love of God and in the communion of the Holy Spirit.”

The Apostle’s Creed opens with an affirmation that is equally Trinitarian:

*I believe in God,
the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, (1)
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord: (2)
Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit ... (3)*

This confession is in part the confession of a mystery – there is one God, alone, who is infinite and eternal, Creator of all things, the greatest good, indivisible in essence and nature, yet One who exists in a plurality of three distinct persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The Hebrew *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4) reminds us to hear and receive the truth that “The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” God is one, there is room for no other. God is infinite, omnipresent, unbounded by time and space. He is not diminished when He takes on human flesh to dwell among us in the person of Jesus, fully God and fully man. Nor is He diminished now in the days when the Holy Spirit is poured out in and among God’s people. The Trinity is a mystery, indeed, but a mystery revealed.

The contemporary bent toward pluralism is an outright denial of the God revealed in the Bible. If God is infinite, there is no room for other infinite deities. If God is not infinite, then God is not God. To say that you personally believe in the God of the Bible but then to turn and say that there may be other authentic gods is to bear witness against yourself.

Being a Christian is not just about accepting my status as a creature in relationship to the Creator nor is it about responding to the fresh winds of spirituality that I perceive in the world about me. The Christian faith takes root in a human heart when God the Holy Spirit leads a person to receive the truth and grace of God the Father manifest in God the Son. The Christian faith is essentially Trinitarian and Reformed Christian faith is utterly theocentric from Alpha to Omega, beginning to end.

For study and discussion:

Scripture: Read and reflect on 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 1:20-22, Romans 8, Ephesians 1:7-12 and Revelation 4:11. What does each of these texts reveal to you about the nature of the Trinity?

Confessions: Read and reflect on The Nicene Creed, Scots Confession 3.01, Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter II. How does each of these confessional statements inform and instruct your understanding of God and your faith in God?

Prayer: Pray with the desperate father in Luke 9:24, “I believe, help Thou my unbelief.”

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Week II: The authority of the Scriptures

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments 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 theological doctrine, mission, church order, character, ethical behavior and lifestyle choices. Any teaching that rejects these claims is false teaching.

"All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

2 Timothy 3:16-17

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. Any teaching that rejects the authority of God by rejecting the authority of God's Word must be rejected.

Revelation (and reason)

Christianity is a revealed faith. God is generally revealed in creation (read Romans 1:19-20, Psalm 19) and fully revealed in the person of Jesus who is the Word made flesh. The way that we know about Jesus is through God's specific revelation recorded in the Bible.

The word for "inspired" literally means "God-breathed." The Bible is God's exhalation – of course, He used human minds to receive it and human hands to write it down. The Bible is 100 percent the work of human beings and 100 percent the Word of God. Just as Jesus is fully human and fully divine. Mysterious indeed! But let us not deny something just because we cannot comprehend it.

Jesus believed that the Scriptures of His day (what we have as the Old Testament) were the Word of God. God is the author – even if the Bible was written by many human hands. That's the nature of inspiration. And it is from the author that the Bible derives its authority.

When we submit to the authority of the Bible we are not submitting to words on a page but to the author of the words – we do not worship the Bible, we worship God; we do not follow the Bible, we follow Jesus Christ. Any attempt to suggest that the Bible is not objectively the Word of God or that it contains the Word of God or may become the Word of God must be rejected. So too must efforts to subordinate the Bible to any human authority, cultural idea or personal proclivity. Any teaching that asserts a revelation from the Spirit of God that contradicts the Bible as Word of God, or that advocates one follow Jesus apart from the person, work and will of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible, must be rejected.

For study and discussion:

Scripture: Read and reflect on 2 Timothy 3:16-17, I Thessalonians 2:13 and Matthew 4:4. What does each of these passages say about the Scriptures themselves?

Confessions: Read and reflect on the 2nd Helvetic Confession 5.001, 5.003, 5.010, The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter I; The Larger Catechism Questions 3 & 4. How does each of these confessional statements inform and instruct your faith?

Prayer: Pray Colossians 3:16-17 with the apostle Paul.

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Week III: The human condition and salvation

God created human beings in His image with a freedom of the will. The first human beings had the capacity to choose to glorify God and love Him forever. They chose instead to edify their own desires, and so “fell” out of relationship with God and into a state of bondage to sin. The consequence of that sin is death. If you are not familiar with the “Roman Road,” reading through Romans 3:19-26, 5:6-6:23, 8:1-4, 10:9-13 will help you see this progression.

Having fallen into a pit, humanity was certainly not in a position to dig itself out. Help had to come from the outside. And in Jesus Christ, God did just that. “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” (II Corinthians 5:21) Righteousness cannot be achieved, it must be received as the free gift offered by God in Jesus Christ. There is no other means of salvation as there is no other name under heaven by which we can be saved.

Indeed, salvation is by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Adding these three Reformation *solas* to *sola Scriptura* (the Bible alone), *sola gratia*, *sola fide* and *sola Christus*, enable us to render our lives to the *sola Deo Gloria* (glory to God alone).

The life we now live is not our own. It has been bought with a price and it is offered to God as a living sacrifice that He might use it as He wills. Ephesians 2:8-10 sums it up, saying, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Salvation is not only saved from the consequences of sin and death; salvation is also saved for a God-ordained purpose that we might be sanctified, conformed evermore to the image of Christ, by one degree of glory to another. This side of heaven we will not be glorified, but by dying to sin every day and living in Christ, we can certainly be edified and used by God as agents of His grace.

For study and discussion:

Scripture: Read and reflect on Romans 3:19-26, 5:1-2, and I Peter 2:24. What do these passages teach us about ourselves, salvation in Jesus Christ and the desires of God?

Read and reflect on Acts 4:5-12. What would you do if you were “called to account” for your faith in Christ? What does Peter’s testimony teach us about the nature and scope of Christ’s saving work?

Confessions: Read and reflect on the Heidelberg Catechism, questions 1-25.

Prayer: Pray the prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21 and the doxology in Romans 11:33-36.

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Week IV: Covenant faith and Covenant life

God said to Abram, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing – and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:2-3)

The setting is the Near East. Throughout the regions of Egypt and Mesopotamia people worshiped on the high places, celebrating fertility with ritual prostitution and the worship of many gods. Into this reality, the One True God spoke and called out for Himself a people. God’s purpose in calling Abram was to reveal the truth of who He is and to show a way of life that is compatible with God’s holiness. Read Genesis 12:1-3.

The covenant life is not a contract. Covenant means a binding pact between God and His chosen people. God initiates the covenant and stipulates all the provisions. There is no negotiating. Blessings come from trust and obedience, not as the by-product of some signing bonus or because we meet certain quotas of good. Remember, grace is free (not cheap, but free) – and God’s covenant is a covenant of grace.

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. God adapted this covenant model to describe His special relationship and bond with the people he redeemed.

In Jesus, the promised Messiah, we encounter the mediator of God’s perfect and everlasting covenant (Heb. 9:15). Doing what we could not do, Jesus has perfectly fulfilled the obligations of the covenant for us. 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.

The covenant community is called, tested and watched over by God. Imperfect people like you and me are molded into a message sent into the world. That message is, “God is God and God loves sinners. How do I know? Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. God wants you to share in the joy of knowing redemption and restoration, to live a purposeful life of hope – and God wants to make you a part of a great people – a people on a worldwide mission to reveal God’s love to others.”

For study and discussion:

Scripture: Read and reflect on Genesis 9:8-17; 17:1-8; Exodus 19:3-6 and II Samuel 7:12-16. With whom is each covenant made? What is promised?

Read and reflect on Jeremiah 23:5-6; 31:31-34; Isaiah 9:6-7; and Hebrews 9:15. What do these passages tell us about God’s plans to extend His covenantal relationship in a new way (and through whom)? Read and reflect on Ephesians 2:12-13, I Peter 2:9-10 and Galatians 3:28. What do these passages tell us about the nature of God’s covenant people in the world today?

Confessions: Read/reflect on the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 7.

Prayer: Pray through Hebrews 13:20-21.

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Week V: The Church and its mission

The Church is made up of people who have responded to Jesus' call; received the Holy Spirit; and been sent forth by God into mission.

The calling, commissioning, composing and casting of the Church always begins with God and is always directed toward His purpose.

Why does the Church exist?

The Church exists to glorify God, bearing witness to Jesus Christ in word and deed by the power of the Holy Spirit. This calling is articulated in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20), in the description of the church in Acts 2:42-47 and in the charge to the early Christians (II Corinthians 5:11-20; Philippians 2:1-11; 3:14; Colossians 3:12-17).

The Church's mission is beautifully articulated in the third chapter of the *Book of Order* and enumerated as a list of "Great Ends of the Church" in G-1.0200:

1. the proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind;
2. the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
3. the maintenance of divine worship;
4. the preservation of the truth;
5. the promotion of social righteousness; and
6. the exhibition of the kingdom of Heaven to the world.

Biblical images of the Church include the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, the branches of the vine of Christ, the disciples of Christ, the new creation in Christ, the ambassadors of Christ, the ministers of Christ's reconciling work and the co-heirs with Christ. According to the Bible, the Church possesses the Spirit of Christ, cultivates the very mind of Christ, and is being conformed more and more into the image of Christ every day as God's provisional demonstration of the Gospel of Christ to the world.

For study and discussion:

Scripture: Read and reflect on I Peter 2:4-10. How are we being built together into a spiritual house, a royal priesthood, offering ourselves as living sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ? In our fellowship, is the Word of God encountered as a stumbling block or cornerstone of faith?

Do we acknowledge that a war is being waged for our souls? Do we live in a defensive or offensive posture? Are we actively working to take ground for the kingdom of Christ or are we just trying to protect those already saved? What's our battle plan? What are our strategies for protecting and nurturing the young and weak as well as arming the warriors for the fight?

In what specific ways are we living "such good lives among the pagans that they may see our good deeds and glorify God?" How are we holding one another accountable for our behavior in the world? How are we actively encouraging one another to live in the world to not live as a part of it?

Confessions: Read and reflect on the Second Helvetic Confession, chapter 17.

Prayer: Pray with Jesus for the Church using the 17th chapter of the Gospel of John.

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Guide helps confession become a tool fit for the hands of believers

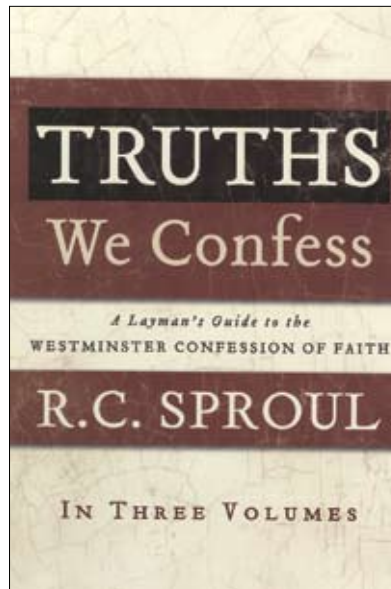
Reviewed by Carmen Fowler
The Layman

This series is a must-read for pastors and lay leaders who desire to be equipped to teach the Reformed faith through the use of the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Written with a pastoral tone and in lay people's language, Sproul does what others have attempted and often failed to achieve: putting Reformed systematic theology within everyone's reach. Pastors and elders being examined for entrance into denominations that continue to hold the Westminster as their sole confessional standard will find this work a true gift.

The box set includes three volumes. Volume I: The Triune God covers chapters 1-8 of Westminster, Volume II: Salvation and the Christian Life covers chapters 9-22, and Volume III: The State, the Family, the Church and Last Things covers chapters 23-33. Sproul not only walks through the Confession unpacking it "chapter and verse," he comments throughout on the 21st century challenges Christians face in holding such faithful positions. Through Sproul's instruction, the Westminster actually becomes a tool fit for the hand of every believer in defense of their faith in the culture in which we live.

In his comments on chapter 5 of Westminster: of Providence, Sproul writes, "... the concept of providence has diminished in significance because of our culture's dominant worldview. It assumes that we live in a closed, mechanistic universe, in which everything happens according to the direct causality of physical things, by the fixed laws of nature, which operate independently of God. Nothing is more repugnant to the Biblical worldview of God than the idea that the world exists independently of him, functioning and operating on its own power, obeying its own built-in, inherent laws ...



Truths We Confess:
A Layman's Guide to the
Westminster Confession
of Faith
(in three volumes)
by R.C. Sproul
P&R Publishing, 2006.

Because we live in a time when the divine aspect is ignored or set aside, we have lost the sense of God's providence, which was at the core of Christian faith for centuries." (volume I, page 143-144). As he moves through the sections of the chapter on Providence the reader is uplifted, invited into the reality of God's ongoing presence, power, and purpose throughout all days. And so, the theology on the page begins to live.

When dealing with difficult issues like double-predestination or limited atonement (yes, he talks specifically about T.U.L.I.P.) Sproul uses stories, quotes the church fathers, and invites the reader into dialogue using a question and answer format. He also refers throughout the relevant passages of Scripture, mindful to always keep the Confession subordinate to the Word.

In discussing God's eternal decree (Westminster chapter 3), Sproul says, "In Romans 9 the apostle Paul gives his most extensive explanation of the doctrine of election. In the process, he anticipates objections that will be raised. In the middle of his discussion of election, he raises a question before his readers can: 'What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God?' (Rom. 9:14) That is the first objection the apostle expects to hear from his readers, so he deals with it up front" (Volume 1, page 85). So does Sproul, thereby equipping his readers to anticipate the objections that will be raised by their 21st century neighbors and friends, preparing them to answer with an intelligent Reformed faith.

This series is recommended for lay people, Sunday school classes, Bible study groups, Elders and seminarians in preparation for examination on Westminster, and all who want to be more fully equipped to articulate the faith once delivered to the saints.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Carmen Fowler is the author of the equipping section that appears in the center of each issue of *The Layman*. Your feedback is greatly appreciated as future studies are planned.

Share your comments with Carmen via e-mail at cfowler@layman.org, call 1-800-368-0110 or write her at P.O. 2210, Lenoir, NC 28645.

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Other resources

San Diego Presbytery's "**Essential Tenets and Reformed Distinctives.**" The Presbytery of San Diego adopted the summary of the essential tenets of the Christian faith and of our Reformed distinctives for use in churches, committees, and presbytery. It distills the 300 pages of the *Book of Confessions* to a helpful summary – six essentials and seven distinctives.
www.presbyterysd.org/docs/ETRD_030608.pdf

The Foundation for Reformed Theology strives to help ministers become the best preachers, teachers, and pastors possible and thus to help them in their work of building up the local congregations of the church so as to strengthen the entire church of Jesus Christ.
www.foundationrt.org/

A Primer in Reformed Theology is designed to help small groups "return to the sources" and study Reformed theology in a systematic way throughout 2010. John Calvin's 1541 Institutes is the foundation. A pastor-scholar introduces each chapter, draws connections to Scripture and the wider Reformed tradition, and points out specific issues for further discussion.
www3.ptsem.edu/Offices/ConEd/adFontes/default.aspx

Reformed Theological Seminary offers "Virtual Courses" available on the iTunes Web site. For more information.
<http://itunes.rts.edu/>