

# Overview of Key Reformed Beliefs

These are some of the foundational beliefs articulated in our Reformed confessions. To fully understand Reformed theology, we recommend reading the confessions themselves

Reformed Christians sometimes say we're "Reformed and always reforming." This means we never stop asking whether we're being faithful to God's vision and reforming the church to follow God's will. We do this because we believe humans are broken. And we know how easy it is for our sinful nature to corrupt God's church.

Scripture is the highest authority on our faith and its practice. Statements of belief called creeds and confessions also shape our faith and root us in Reformed theology. While people often associate the Reformed tradition with Calvinism, there's more to our Reformed beliefs than the five points of Calvinism you may have heard about.

## GOD

### The Triune God

## God is creator, redeemer, and sustainer

***Triune:** The Christian understanding of God as three persons united in one essence.*

***Providence:** The power God uses to see to it that everything happens in order to bring about his loving, wise purposes.*

We believe in one God who eternally exists in three equally divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is "eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, infinite, almighty; completely wise, just, and good" (Belgic Confession, Article 1).

God the Father is the creator of all things, visible and invisible, sustaining and providentially ruling over creation in an active relationship of love. Through God the Son, whom we know as Jesus Christ, God redeems a people for himself and restores his creation. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, God is present to us, making us more into the image of Jesus Christ. All of this is done "to the praise of his glorious grace" (Ephesians 1:6).

## The sovereignty of God

# God is sovereign over the universe

Reformed Christians have a high view of God's sovereignty, a belief that "nothing happens in this world without God's orderly arrangement" (Belgic Confession, Article 13). But we don't believe God uses that power carelessly. Instead, we emphasize God's loving providence, which explains that God makes all things work together for our good (Romans 8:28). God's sovereignty is exercised as God sustains "heaven and earth and all creatures" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 27) and in the particular way that God "gathers, protects, and cares for the church through Word and Spirit. This, God has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end" (Belhar Confession, Point 1).

### God's self-revelation

## How we know God

**Revelation:** *The ways that God makes himself known to us.*

Early Christians said that God revealed himself to us through two "books": the book of nature and the book of Scripture. We know God through the world God created, including our own selves: "The universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder ... God's eternal power and divinity" (Belgic Confession, Article 2). The book of nature shows us God as Creator, but it is not sufficient to know God as Redeemer. Additionally, as a result of sin, we cannot even see God rightly in creation. Only with the spectacles of Scripture are we able to see God's glory revealed in creation.

The Bible brings a specificity to God's self-revelation that's not available in creation. In Scripture, God reveals himself in the person of Jesus Christ, who is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). What we learn of God through Scripture is sufficient to provide us with what "we need in this life, for God's glory and for our salvation" (Belgic Confession, Article 2).

### The Bible is the Word of God

We believe the Bible—the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments—was not composed "by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:21). Because God is their true author, the words of

Scripture are holy and divine. We trust the words of the Bible “above all because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God” (Belgic Confession, Article 5).

One of the defining characteristics of the Reformation was its insistence on *sola Scriptura*, or the belief that everything we need for salvation and a life of faith is available in Scripture. Reformed Christians sometimes say the Bible is “the only rule of faith and life.”

## God’s intention for creation

# God created all things and called them good

***Shalom:** Hebrew for “peace,” a description of God’s design for creation as one of wholeness, harmony, justice, and life-giving peace*

We believe that “God created heaven and earth and all other creatures from nothing” and gave “all creatures their being, form, and appearance” (Belgic Confession, Article 12). The book of Genesis affirms the original goodness of God’s creation; after each piece of creation, the narrative notes that “God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1).

In the creation narrative, God creates humans on the sixth and final day of bringing things into being. Although we are part of creation, we are unique in that God formed humans “in his image and likeness—good, just, and holy” (Belgic Confession, Article 14). No other creature bears the image of God. Humans were also given a specific role, to tend and keep the rest of creation.

God’s intention for creation was that everything live together in harmony. God longs for humans to “truly know God their creator, love him with all their heart, and live with him in eternal happiness for his praise and glory” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 6).

## Why we need salvation

# Human beings are broken and sinful

***Total depravity:** the belief that, because of the fall, human nature is deeply corrupted by sin.*

**Original sin:** *belief that since the fall of humanity into sin, all humans have inherited a sinful nature.*

Human beings started out with the ability to follow God's will perfectly (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 9). God sculpted us in his own image, as mirrors of God's goodness, justice, and holiness.

But we chose to turn away from God. Our disobedience "so poisoned our nature" that all of us are wired from birth to be sinners (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 7). And the sin of humans caused all of creation to be "subjected to futility" and put "in bondage to decay" (Romans 8:20, 21). All of the perfection of God's original creation has been undone as a result of humanity's rebellion against God.

We're broken, and it's impossible for us to fix ourselves. No matter how hard we try to do the right thing, "sin constantly boils forth as though from a contaminated spring" (Belgic Confession, Article 15). Without God's grace, we "are neither willing nor able to return to God" (Canons of Dort, Main Points 3 and 4, Article 3).

God's justice demands that our sin be punished. But only someone who is both "a true and righteous human," and "also true God" could ever pay the price for the sins of humanity (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 15).

## **Atonement through Christ alone**

# **Jesus died to atone for our sins**

**Atonement:** *reconciliation with God, from whom sin divides us.*

Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God, came to earth to reconcile us with God. Jesus became human and lived a life without sin. Then he sacrificed his life in our name.

By suffering death on the cross, Jesus took the punishment our sins deserved. His death "is the only and entirely complete sacrifice and satisfaction for sins; it is of infinite value and worth, more than sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world" (Canons of Dort, Main Point 2, Article 3).

Three days after Jesus died, he rose from the dead. Through his resurrection, Jesus conquered death so that anyone who believes in him can join him in everlasting life.

## **Justification through faith alone**

# Faith in Jesus is all we need to be saved

***Justification:** to be made right in the eyes of God.*

Even in our best moments, our actions are stained with sin. Yet out of sheer grace, God gives us the righteousness of Christ. Christ wipes our record clean. It's as if we have never sinned. All we have to do is accept his gift of salvation "with a believing heart" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 60).

In other words, we are justified by faith, not by anything we've done. Our righteousness is in Jesus. We couldn't live a perfect life ourselves, so he lived a perfect life for us. Faith is the "instrument by which we embrace Christ." It "keeps us in communion with him and with all his benefits" (Belgic Confession, Article 22).

## Salvation through grace alone

# God gives us the faith to receive salvation

***Unconditional election:** belief that God has chosen people to save in advance and prepares their hearts to receive the gift of salvation; God offers this gift to people not based on their merit but as an act of undeserved grace.*

We're so trapped in sin that we cannot find our way back to God on our own. As Christ says, "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me" (John 6:44).

God gives us the faith to accept salvation as an act of undeserved grace (Canons of Dort, Main Point 1, Article 7). We receive this gift without any consideration of the things we've done. Our merits and strength have nothing to do with it.

## **You cannot lose the gift of salvation**

Faith in Christ isn't a gift God will take away from you. God preserves the seed of our faith in times of doubt. And no matter how badly we sin, salvation in Jesus covers us.

"God's plan cannot be changed; God's promise cannot fail; the calling according to God's purpose cannot be revoked" (Canons of Dort, Main Point 2, Article 8). If God has chosen to give you the gift of salvation through Christ, you cannot lose your salvation. Even though you might stumble in your faith and make mistakes, the Holy Spirit's seal on your heart can't be invalidated or wiped out.

## Sanctification through the Holy Spirit

# The Holy Spirit makes us more like Jesus over time

**Sanctification:** *belief that those who are justified by faith in Jesus are continually being made more holy through the work of the Holy Spirit.*

Christ's blood doesn't just redeem us for what we've done in the past. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, true faith in Jesus reshapes our hearts to better match the heart of Jesus. This continual process of being made more holy is called sanctification.

It is impossible for holy faith to be unfruitful. After all, we aren't talking about an empty faith. We're talking about what Scripture calls "faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6). This faith moves people to do by themselves the works that God has commanded in the Word.

Becoming more like Jesus doesn't mean we can be our own salvation. We still sin. And even a tiny speck of human selfishness, corruption, jealousy, or pride would disqualify a work from being worthy of salvation in God's eyes (Belgic Confession, Article 24).

## The body of Christ

# The church is Christ's body on earth

The Christian church "is a gathering of persons chosen in Christ through the Holy Spirit to profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior in order to embody God's intentions for the world" (*Book of Church Order, Preamble*). Scripture calls the church "the body of Christ" and calls Christ our head. The church is faithful in its call when "it participates in mission, in calling all persons to life in Christ, and in proclaiming God's promise and commands to all the world" (Preamble).

## The marks of the "true church"

The church is under the authority of Jesus Christ, who unites believers to himself and to each other. The church goes wrong when it "assigns more authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God."

Historically, the church has been characterized by three "marks":

- It proclaims the gospel (Belgic Confession, Article 29)

- It administers the sacraments as Christ instituted them (Belgic Confession, Article 29)
- It practices discipline when members are not living out their faith (Belgic Confession, Article 29)

A fourth characteristic of the church, unity, is worth including here. It's not identified among the classical Reformation marks of the church, but it is captured in the [Nicene Creed](#) and elaborated upon in the [Belhar Confession](#). That characteristic is that the church is united by Christ with God and each other (Belhar Confession, Point 2)

## **Proclamation of the gospel**

# **The church is called to embody the gospel of Jesus in Word and deed**

The gospel promises that “everyone who believes in [Jesus] may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). The church is called to proclaim this gospel promise to all nations and people without discrimination (Canons of Dort, Main Point 2, Article 5). It's through the “preaching of the holy gospel” that the “Holy Spirit produces [faith] in our hearts” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 65).

The Belhar Confession says, “The church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells.”

In a world full of injustice and hate, one way we bear witness to the gospel is to join God in standing for peace and justice. While redemption has an eternal quality, God also cares about the immediate needs of people: “God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry. ... God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly” (Belhar Confession, Point 4). Because of that, Reformed Christians believe that “the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Belhar Confession, Point 4).

## **Sacraments**

# The sacraments are signs and seals of God's heavenly promises

***Sacraments:** practices instituted by Christ as signs and seals of God's promises in the gospel.*

“Sacraments are visible, holy signs and seals” instituted by Jesus to help us understand the promise of the gospel and to seal its promise in us (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 66). They allow us to experience with our external senses what we hear in God's Word and feel the Spirit do in our hearts.

In this way, the sacraments help us focus on the truth at the heart of our faith: “the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 67).

## **There are two sacraments in the Reformed church: Baptism and the Lord's Supper**

### *Baptism*

“Christ has commanded that all those who belong to him be baptized with pure water ‘in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’” (Belgic Confession, Article 34). Baptism signifies that the blood of Christ washes our souls, just as water washes away the dirt of the body. We baptize both infants and adults because both are part of “God's covenant and are his people” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 74).

### *The Lord's Supper*

At the Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus broke bread and said, “Take and eat; this is my body” (Matthew 26:26). After supper, he took the cup and said, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:27-28). As we eat the bread and drink from the cup of communion, we remember Christ's true body and blood, which we receive into our souls by faith.

## **Church discipline**

# **The church wants to restore people who stray**



The true church “governs itself according to the pure Word of God,” rejecting everything contrary to Scripture (Belgic Confession, Article 29). Reformed churches follow a governance structure that involves ministers, elders, and deacons. These “offices,” as they’re called, are put in place for the oversight and care of the church. One of the responsibilities of church leadership is to care spiritually for church members who are not living in accordance with God’s Word. Church discipline is intended to restore people to right relationship with God.

## **Unity in Christ**

# **The church is one body drawn together from the entire human family**

In Jesus Christ, the church has a twofold unity: with God and with each other. All Christians, regardless of theological stripe, belong to the same body. “We believe in one holy, universal, Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family” (Belhar Confession, Point 2). “We share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope.”

Our unity in Christ is “both a gift and an obligation for the church.” It “must become visible” so that the world can see that “separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered” (Belhar Confession, Point 2).

## **From the garden to the new city**

# **We await new heaven and new earth**

While God has indeed secured redemption completely in Jesus Christ, we do not get to experience its fullness yet. We look forward to the day that God will bring about the ultimate restoration of all things. Finally, God will judge evil for what it is, bringing an end to the power of sin and death. Wickedness will be destroyed and God will make “all things new” (Revelation 21:5).

In that day, God's kingdom will be "so complete and perfect that in it [God will be] all in all" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 123).

As believers, we are united to Christ, both in his death and in his resurrection, which "is a guarantee of our glorious resurrection" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 45). We will be raised to new life in body as well as spirit. In that new life, we "will have perfect blessedness such as no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human heart has ever imagined" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 58).

In the words of God: "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them" (Revelation 21:3). Amen and amen!