

An Overview of the Theological Doctrines in the Book of Confessions

The Book of Order, in discussing the Confessions, notes that there are particular doctrines that all Christians share, particular doctrines all Protestants share, and particular doctrines unique to the Reformed Tradition. While there is no set “list” of essential tenets of the Reformed faith, due to our watchwords of “*Reformed, and always being reformed, according to the Word of God,*” this is about the closest we come. This is what the Book of Order says (essential doctrines are bold and italicized):

F-2.03 THE CONFESSIONS AS STATEMENTS OF THE FAITH OF THE CHURCH CATHOLIC

In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) witnesses to the faith of the Church catholic. The confessions express the faith of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church in the recognition of canonical Scriptures and the formulation and adoption of the ecumenical creeds, notably the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds with their definitions of the *mystery of the triune God* and of the *incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ*.

F-2.04 THE CONFESSIONS AS STATEMENTS OF THE FAITH OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) upholds the affirmations of the Protestant Reformation. The focus of these affirmations is God’s grace in Jesus Christ as revealed in the Scriptures. The Protestant watchwords—*grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone*—embody principles of understanding that continue to guide and motivate the people of God in the life of faith.

F-2.05 THE CONFESSIONS AS STATEMENTS OF THE FAITH OF THE REFORMED TRADITION

In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) expresses the faith of the Reformed tradition. Central to this tradition is the affirmation of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who in Christ and by the power of the Spirit creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love. Related to this *central affirmation of God’s sovereignty* are other great themes of the Reformed tradition:

The *election of the people of God* for service as well as for salvation;

Covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God;

A *faithful stewardship* that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God’s creation; and

The recognition of the *human tendency to idolatry and tyranny*, which calls the people of God to work for the *transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience* to the Word of God.

The table on the following page shows this same information in a more easily digestible form:

Some Essential Tenets of the Reformed Faith

Tradition	Tenet / Belief / Doctrine
Catholic (universal)	1. Trinity – the mystery of the triune God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
	2. Incarnation – of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ.
Protestant	3. Justification by grace through faith – grace alone, faith alone
	4. Scripture reveals God’s grace in Jesus Christ – Scripture alone
Reformed	5. Sovereignty of God – the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love
	6. Election for service and salvation – love of neighbor as well as love of God
	7. Covenant life – marked by disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God
	8. Stewardship – that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God’s creation
	9. Human tendency toward idolatry and tyranny – which calls the people of God to work...
	10. ...for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God

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The confessions in our Book of Confessions witness to these doctrines, gleaned from Scripture, and contribute to our understanding of them in unique and different ways. Below is a table that shows the primary contribution of each confession to our understanding of these doctrines.

Themes & Doctrines in the *Book of Confessions*

Confession	Date(s)	Location	Themes
Nicene Creed	325 AD	Constantinople	Personhood of Jesus Christ Reality of the Holy Spirit (Trinity)
Apostles' Creed	2 nd -8 th centuries	Rome N. Africa Gaul	Trinity – One God in Three Persons God as Creator
Scots Confession	1560	Scotland	Election The Church (Discipline & Obedience)
Heidelberg Catechism	1563	Germany	Comfort Faithful Stewardship The Lord's Supper
Second Helvetic Confession	1566	Switzerland	Covenant Life Baptism
Westminster Confession & Catechisms	1649	England	Sovereignty of God Authority of Scripture
Theological Declaration of Barmen	1934	Germany	Tendency towards Idolatry Lordship of Christ
Confession of 1967	1967	U.S.A.	Reconciliation in Church & Society Equality of Persons Social Action
Belhar Confession	1986	South Africa	Unity in the Church Ministry of Reconciliation Justice
Brief Statement of Faith	1990	U.S.A.	Jesus' Life & Ministry Human Equality Ordination of Women