

THE FELLOWSHIP  
**Theology**  
PROJECT



THE  
**Fellowship**  
OF PRESBYTERIANS

# Forward

As the theological work group considered our charge to help the Fellowship and the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO) clarify theological identity, we discovered three tasks. The first task requires looking to the past. The second task requires a new statement. The third task requires commitment for the future. Each of the three tasks requires us to re-covenant.

**The first task** is to identify the statements of our confessional heritage that will connect us with the one holy catholic apostolic church and express our distinctively Reformed convictions within that church. We propose the collection of confessional documents in the *Book of Confessions* as the appropriate theological expression at this moment in our life together. These creeds, confessions, and catechisms have much needed wisdom of proven worth for us, and can uniquely serve as the central documents for a new Fellowship that strives to retain meaningful connections among congregations, some of whom will be within the PC(USA), some of whom will be in the ECO.

Critical to this first task is clear commitment to our confessional heritage in fresh and robust ways that announces what **we** mean when **we** say **we** adopt these documents, and defined accountability for keeping that covenant. The documents that compose the *Book of Confessions* are not seen in our rear view mirrors as road markers of where the church has been; they are seen through our windshield as faithful and sure guides for our perilous road ahead.

Casual affirmation of our theological heritage by our generation has severely weakened our worship and witness. We are squandering the gifts our confessional heritage could give us. We confess we have not been good stewards of the Faith. We must now reengage the Faith of the Church in ways that are more deeply committed to its truth and thus its value in ordering our life toward faithfulness. We have a strong conviction that our current theological failures are not the failures of the bishops at Nicea, the divines at Westminster, or the

confessors at Barmen; the failures are our own. Now is the time to confess it and strengthen our theological covenant.

We recognize that the Fellowship and/or the ECO may, after a time of building and testing theological consensus among us, alter this judgment. But it is our opinion that the theological consensus among evangelicals has not been tested and, further, that to presume a consensus where one does not exist is to repeat one of the most significant theological failures of our generation. As members of the ordered ministries of the Church, we have agreed to the *Book of Confessions*. Let us keep that covenant that we may be found faithful to any new theological covenant we will make.

The first paper invites us to see the wisdom in reaffirming the creeds, confessions, and catechisms of the *Book of Confessions*, and invites us to say and live our confessions in ways that are profoundly faithful.

**The second task** is to identify and articulate the essentials of the Reformed Faith as expressed in these documents. To this end, we offer a new naming and explication of those essentials. This task helps us keep the renewed covenant we make in the first task.

While the value and role of the essentials have long been debated; the essentials themselves have not been identified for debate. Recent generations have acknowledged their presence – this is stated clearly in every officer’s ordination questions – and yet simultaneously we have not bothered to locate them. We are impoverished for their absence.

We are also too broad. A collection of confessions lends itself to the wisdom of identifying what is essential within them. Our theological ideas and inclinations as a church are far too diffuse to unite us. We reject the proposition that theology divides. Instead, we affirm the proposition that truth tends toward unity, yet we are the first generation of Presbyterian officers who do not have in the same ordination question

the words truth and unity. Identifying essentials necessarily and rightly focuses our theological conversation and our life together.

This paper's depth may be challenging for some. We acknowledge this and we encourage you to read it more than once, and to read it together with others. This is a teaching moment. Let us use this to deepen our knowledge of the Reformed Faith.

The second paper invites us to discuss, debate, deliberate, and finally to decide what truths reside in the heart of our Faith and what is the proper Reformed expressions of those truths.

**The third task** is to identify the theological practices that will sustain us for the next generation and which we must, therefore, commit to and sustain. This will help us preserve and advance the work of the first two tasks.

Structures for doing theological work and for keeping theological integrity need to be established. Theology is not only to be established in our minds and become formative for our hearts, it is to be embodied in our manner of life and in the structures of the church. Companies of Pastors and Orders of Elders need to be formed. Teaching and Ruling Elders must relearn

how to fulfill their missional callings in light of the Faith of the Church. Our faithfulness depends on it. We strongly propose that new structures be formed for the purpose of making a contribution to the theological well-being of the church so that our Faith can make its full contribution to the mission of the Church.

We propose the establishment of theological friendships in communities of mutual encouragement and accountability. This is an invitation for all ruling and teaching elders to commit to disciplined ways of life together.

Three things are necessary for the theological work of the church to flourish and in return for theology to help the church to flourish – adoption of theological confession with utmost sincerity, articulation of the confession with great clarity, and forming structures that sustain those convictions.

These three papers propose these three necessary tasks and invite us to covenant toward those ends. We offer them in the emerging work of The Fellowship of Presbyterians and the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians.

God help us.

## Theology Taskforce

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# Confessional Standards

The appropriate confessional standards for the Fellowship/the ECO are the creeds, confessions, and catechisms in the *Book of Confessions* – The Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed, the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Second Helvetic Confession, the Westminster Confession, the Westminster Shorter Catechism and the Westminster Larger Catechism, the Theological Declaration of Barmen, the Confession of 1967, and A Brief Statement of Faith. This collection is theologically faithful, ecclesially appropriate, and organizationally suitable. The *Book of Confessions* contains the confessions that we have taken vows to receive. It also embodies the Reformed understanding of the way confessions function in the life of the church, an understanding that differs from two common approaches:

**Doctrinal Progressives** understand the church's confessional and theological tradition as an evolutionary development of doctrine in which the church's expression of the gospel becomes richer in each succeeding age. In this view, contemporary theology and new confessions of faith are more developed, better expressed, fuller apprehensions of truth than the faith of previous centuries. *Our way is the way.*

**Doctrinal Restorationists** understand the church's theological and confessional tradition as a series of missteps leading to imperfect understanding and inadequate articulation of the gospel. In this view, a particular moment in the church's confessional and theological tradition, such as the sixteenth century Augsburg Confession or the seventeenth century Westminster standards, is the pure faith of a theological golden age. *Their way is the way.*

**The Reformed understanding** of the church's confessional and theological tradition sees contemporary Christians as participants in an enduring theological and doctrinal conversation that shapes the patterns of the church's faith and life. Communities of believers from every time and place engage in a continuous discussion about the shape of Christian faith and life, an exchange that is maintained through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Today's church brings its insights into an ongoing dialogue with those who have lived and died the Faith before us. Voices from throughout the church's life contribute to the interchange – ancient voices that articulate the enduring rule of faith, sixteenth and seventeenth century voices that shape the Reformed tradition, and twentieth century voices that proclaim the church's faith in challenging contexts. The confessions in the *Book of Confessions* were not arbitrarily included, but were selected to give faithful voice to the whole communion of saints.

The *Book of Confessions* is an appropriate expression of the Reformed commitment to honor our fathers and mothers in the Faith. It begins with two foundational creeds, shared throughout the whole Church. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is the decisive dogmatic articulation of Trinitarian faith. It establishes the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of Christian theology. The Apostles' Creed is the baptismal creed that expresses the shared belief of the faithful as persons are incorporated into the body of Christ. Two Reformation confessions, Scots and Second Helvetic, and one Reformation catechism, Heidelberg, give voice to the dawning of the Reformed tradition. The seventeenth century Westminster standards powerfully express God's sovereignty over all of life. The Theological Declaration of Barmen, the Confession of 1967, and A Brief Statement of Faith articulate the church's fidelity to the gospel in the midst of uncongenial and sometimes hazardous cultures. These confessions, from widely different contexts, are complementary. They do not sing in unison, but in a rich harmony that glorifies God and deepens our enjoyment of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

Are these the only voices that could be included in the church's theological conversation? No, but they are faithful witnesses to the gospel and appropriate expressions of the Reformed perspective on Christian faith and life. Participating in their colloquy frees us from the narrow prison cell of our own time and place by listening to the voices of our brothers and sisters who struggled to be faithful in diverse circumstances. Through their confessions of faith we are privileged to hear their wisdom in the midst of our own struggle to be faithful. We overhear conversations among our forebears that expand and enrich our apprehension of the gospel. Sometimes we simply listen in on their discussion, at other times we pay particular attention to one of their voices, and many times we find ourselves participating actively in lively instruction.

The questions of our parents in the faith may not be identical to ours, but their different approaches enable us to understand our own questions better. Their answers may not be identical to ours, yet their answers startle us into new apprehensions of the truth. We may sometimes be puzzled by their particular questions or answers, but even that perplexity serves to clarify our own thinking and the shape of our faithfulness. Throughout the conversation we are aware that all councils may err, yet because we are not doctrinal progressives we acknowledge the confessions have a particular authority over us: we are answerable to them before they are answerable to us.

The confessions call the church to account. Because we are not traditionalists, we can be utterly honest about the church's past failings – crusades and inquisitions, easy acceptance of Christendom and easy dismissal of the leadership of women, neglect of evangelistic mission and excess of missionary zeal. Because we are not idealists we can be utterly honest about the church's current failings – marginalization of the sacraments, indifference to theological labor, easy acceptance of cultural morality, neglect of evangelism, and inadequate mission. If we listen to our forebears in the Faith we will hear their hard questions addressed to us. Perhaps then we can be utterly honest about our own accommodations to the culture, our indifference to the proclamation of the gospel, our abandonment of shared conviction and committed community in easy acquiescence to the individualism and localism of our time.

The confessions are not final authorities; Scripture is the authority that measures all doctrinal, confessional, and theological expression. The Reformed tradition has always understood that while confessional standards are subordinate to the Scriptures, they are, nonetheless, standards. They are not lightly drawn up or subscribed to, nor may they be ignored or dismissed. Being questioned by the confessions is not an exercise in servitude, but liberation from the tyranny of the present that enables us to live freely and faithfully within God's will.

As subordinate standards, the confessions are not free-standing authorities. They are subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, who is known through Scripture, the word of God. Subordination to the Lord and to Scripture's witness serves to locate confessional authority, however, not diminish it. The confessions provide reliable guidance to our reading and reception of Scripture, protecting us from self-absorbed interpretation, and opening us to Christ's way, Christ's truth, and Christ's life.

The *Book of Confessions* itself is not problematic. The problem with the *Book of Confessions* is the church's – the *whole* church's – neglect and misuse of its theological treasure. Too often, we have treated the confessions of the church as museum pieces, historical artifacts of what people used to believe long ago and far away. Too many of us have imagined that our own thoughts are sufficient for faithful proclamation of the gospel. We have been guilty of what C.S. Lewis called "chronological snobbery, the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited." We have also been guilty of reducing the confessions to theological and moral law books, selecting disembodied affirmations as elements in a logical proof. Our task is to put misuse of the confessions behind us, engaging in bold, faithful appropriations of the doctrinal and theological wisdom of the *Book of Confessions*, allowing them to enrich our faith and faithfulness.

The church's confessions are not marginal details in the

church's life. The ordination vows made by most deacons, ruling elders, and teaching elders commit us to receive and adopt their essential tenets, and to be instructed, led, and guided by them. Our task is to be faithful to our vows, reading and studying the confessions, learning from them, teaching them, and living out their wisdom. Shared confession of faith shapes any serious community of faith, and the community's ordered ministries bear a particular obligation to order their confession around the church's creeds, confessions, and catechisms. Because confessional seriousness includes mutual responsibility and accountability, the church must be prepared to instruct, counsel with, or even discipline one ordained who rejects the faith expressed in the confessions.

The Fellowship/the ECO cannot imagine that it should or could disavow the Reformed confessional heritage. Whatever the church's confessional and theological failings may be, they are the failings of all of us. The task now is to embody faithful ways of being Presbyterian. The most appropriate footing for a new venture is the faithful doctrinal and theological foundation provided by the creeds, confessions, and catechisms of the *Book of Confessions*.

# Essential Tenets

Presbyterians have been of two minds about essential tenets. We recognize that just as there are some central and foundational truths of the gospel affirmed by Christians everywhere, so too there are particular understandings of the gospel that define the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition. All Christians must affirm the central mysteries of the faith, and all those who are called to ordered ministries in a Presbyterian church must also affirm the essential tenets of the Reformed tradition. Recognizing the danger in reducing the truth of the gospel to propositions that demand assent, we also recognize that when the essentials become a matter primarily of individual discernment and local affirmation, they lose all power to unite us in common mission and ministry.

Essential tenets are tied to the teaching of the confessions as reliable expositions of Scripture. The essential tenets call out for explication, not as another confession, but as indispensable indicators of confessional convictions about what Scripture leads us to believe and do. Essential tenets do not replace the confessions, but rather witness to the confessions' common core. This document is thus intended not as a new confession but as a guide to the corporate exploration of and commitment to the great themes of Scripture and to the historic Reformed confessions that set forth those themes.

**The great purpose toward which each human life is drawn is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.** Each member of the church glorifies God by recognizing and naming His glory, which is the manifestation and revelation of His own nature. Each member of the church enjoys God by being so united with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit as to become a participant in that divine nature, transformed from one degree of glory to another and escorted by Christ into the loving communion of the Trinity. So we confess our faith not as a matter of dispassionate intellectual assent, but rather as an act by which we give God glory and announce our membership in the body of Christ. We trust that when God's glory is so lifted up and when His nature is thus made manifest in the life of the body, the church will be a light that draws people from every tribe and tongue and nation to be reconciled to God.

## I. God's Word: The Authority for Our Confession

The clearest declaration of God's glory is found in His Word, both incarnate and written. The Son eternally proceeds from the Father as His Word, the full expression of the Father's nature, and since in the incarnation the Word became flesh all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are offered to His dis-

ciples. The written Word grants us those treasures, proclaims the saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and graciously teaches all that is necessary for faith and life. **We glorify God by recognizing and receiving His authoritative self-revelation, both in the infallible Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and also in the incarnation of God the Son.** We affirm that the same Holy Spirit who overshadowed the virgin Mary also inspired the writing and preservation of the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit testifies to the authority of God's Word and illumines our hearts and minds so that we might receive both the Scriptures and Christ Himself aright.

We confess that God alone is Lord of the conscience, but this freedom is for the purpose of allowing us to be subject always and primarily to God's Word. The Spirit will never prompt our conscience to conclusions that are at odds with the Scriptures that He has inspired. The revelation of the incarnate Word does not minimize, qualify, or set aside the authority of the written Word. We are happy to confess ourselves captive to the Word of God, not just individually, but also as members of a community of faith, extending through time and around the globe. In particular, we join with other members of the Presbyterian and Reformed community to affirm the secondary authority of the *Book of Confessions* as a faithful exposition of the Word of God.

## II. Trinity and Incarnation: The Two Central Christian Mysteries

### A. Trinity

The triune nature of God is the first great mystery of the Christian faith. **With Christians everywhere, we worship the only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - who is both one essence and three persons.** God is infinite, eternal, immutable, impassible, and ineffable. He cannot be divided against Himself, nor is He becoming more than He has been, since there is no potential or becoming in Him. He is the source of all goodness, all truth and all beauty, of all love and all life, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. The three persons are consubstantial with one another, being both coeternal, and coequal, such that there are not three gods, nor are there three parts of God, but rather three persons within the one Godhead. The Son is eternally begotten from the Father, and the Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son. All three persons are worthy of worship and praise.

God has no need of anyone or anything beyond Himself. Yet in grace this Triune God is the one Creator of all things. The ongoing act of creation is further manifested in God's gracious

sovereignty and providence, maintaining the existence of the world and all living creatures for the sake of His own glory. He is the Holy One, the ground of all being, whose glory is so great that for us to see Him is to die. Yet He has made the creation to reflect His glory, and He has made human beings in His own image, with a unique desire to know Him and a capacity for relationship with Him. Since our God is a consuming fire whom we in our sin cannot safely approach, He has approached us by entering into our humanity in Jesus Christ.

### B. Incarnation

This is the second great mystery of the Christian faith, affirmed by all Christians everywhere: that **Jesus Christ is both truly God and truly human**. As to His divinity, He is the Son, the second person of the Trinity, being of one substance with the Father; as to His humanity, He is like us in every way but sin, of one substance with us, like us in having both a human soul and a human body. As to His divinity, He is eternally begotten of the Father; as to His humanity, He is born of the virgin Mary, conceived by the Holy Spirit. As to His divinity, His glory fills heaven and earth; as to His humanity, His glory is shown in the form of a suffering servant, most clearly when He is lifted up on the cross in our place.

We confess the mystery of His two natures, divine and human, in one person. We reject any understanding of the communication of attributes that must result in a blending of the two natures such that Jesus Christ is neither truly God nor truly human. We insist upon sufficient distinction between the two natures to preserve the truth of the incarnation, that Jesus Christ is indeed Immanuel, God-with-us, not one who used to be God, nor one who has merely been sent from God. Rather, in His coming we have seen God's glory, for Jesus is the exact imprint of God's very being and in Him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. **The divinity of the Son is in no way impaired, limited, or changed by His gracious act of assuming a human nature, and that His true humanity is in no way undermined by His continued divinity.** This is a mystery that we cannot explain, but we affirm it with joy and confidence.

This mystery of the incarnation is ongoing, for **the risen Jesus, who was sent from the Father, has now ascended to the Father in His resurrected body and remains truly human**. He is bodily present at the right hand of the Father. When we are promised that one day we will see Him face to face, we acknowledge that it is the face of Jesus of Nazareth we will someday see. The one who, for us and for our salvation, was born of Mary, died at Calvary, and walked with disciples to Emmaus is **the same Jesus Christ who is now ascended** and who **will one day return visibly in the body to judge the living and the dead**.

Jesus promised His disciples that He would not leave them comfortless when He ascended into heaven, but would ask the Father to send them the Holy Spirit as a comforter and

advocate. **We are able to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and God only through the work of the Holy Spirit.** He comes to us as He came to the gathered disciples at Pentecost: to kindle our faith, to embolden our witness, and to accompany us in mission.

### III. Essentials of the Reformed Tradition

#### A. God's grace in Christ

God declared that the world He created was good and that human beings, made in His own image, were very good. **The present disordered state of the world, in which we and all things are subject to misery and to evil, is not God's doing, but is rather a result of humanity's free, sinful rebellion against God's will.** God created human beings from the dust of the earth and His own breath, to be His images and representatives, conduits of God's grace to the creation. Since the fall our natural tendency is to abuse and exploit the creation, preferring evil to goodness. God also created human beings to speak His grace and truth to one another, to be helpers who are fit for one another, so that our social relationships would strengthen our ability to serve and obey Him. Since the fall, our natural tendency is to engage in relationships of tyranny and injustice with one another, in which power is used not to protect and serve but to demean. God further created human beings with the capacity for relationship with Him, with His law written on our hearts so that we had the ability to worship Him in love and obey Him by living holy lives. Since the fall, our natural tendency is to hate God and our neighbor, to worship idols of our own devising rather than the one true God.

As a result of sin, human life is poisoned by everlasting death. **No part of human life is untouched by sin. Our desires are no longer trustworthy guides to goodness, and what seems natural to us no longer corresponds to God's design.** We are not merely wounded in our sin; we are dead, unable to save ourselves. Apart from God's initiative, salvation is not possible for us. Our only hope is God's grace. We discover in Scripture that this is a great hope, for our God is the One whose mercy is from everlasting to everlasting.

This grace does not end when we turn to sin. Although we are each deserving of God's eternal condemnation, the eternal Son assumed our human nature, joining us in our misery and offering Himself on the cross in order to free us from slavery to death and sin. Jesus takes our place both in bearing the weight of condemnation against our sin on the cross and in offering to God the perfect obedience that humanity owes to Him but is no longer able to give. All humanity participates in the fall into sin. Those who are united through faith with Jesus Christ are fully forgiven from all our sin, so that there is indeed a new creation. We are declared justified, not because of any good that we have done, but only because of God's grace extended to us in Jesus Christ. **In union with Christ through the power of the Spirit we are brought into right relation with the Father, who receives us as His adopted children.**

**Jesus Christ is the only Way to this adoption, the sole path by which sinners become children of God,** for He is the only-begotten Son, and it is only in union with Him that a believer is able to know God as Father. Only in Jesus Christ is the truth about the Triune God, fully and perfectly revealed, for only He *is* the Truth, only He has seen the Father, and only He can make the Father known. Only Jesus Christ is the new Life that is offered, for He is the bread from heaven and the fountain of living water, the one by whom all things were made, in whom all things hold together. The exclusivity of these claims establishes that God's love is not impersonal, but a particular and intimate love in which each individual child of God is called by name and known as precious; that God's love is not only acceptance, but a transforming and effective love in which His image within us is restored so that we are capable of holy living.

### **B. Election for salvation and service**

The call of God to the individual Christian is not merely an invitation that each person may accept or reject by his or her own free will. **Having lost true freedom of will in the fall, we are incapable of turning toward God of our own volition. God chooses us for Himself in grace before the foundation of the world, not because of any merit on our part, but only because of His love and mercy.** Each of us is chosen in Christ, who is eternally appointed to be head of the body of the elect, our brother and our high priest. He is the one who is bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, our divine Helper who is also our Bridegroom, sharing our human nature so that we may see His glory. We who receive Him and believe in His name do so not by our own will or wisdom, but because His glory compels us irresistibly to turn toward Him. By His enticing call on our lives, Jesus enlightens our minds, softens our hearts, and renews our wills, restoring the freedom that we lost in the fall.

In choosing some, God passes over others. We are all sinners who fall short of God's glory, and we all deserve God's eternal judgment. Apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ, we are incapable of being in God's presence, incapable of bearing the weight of His glory. We rejoice that Jesus Christ offers us safe conduct into the heart of God's consuming and purifying fire, shielding us with His perfect humanity and transforming us by His divine power. Having received such grace, we extend grace to others.

We are not elect for our own benefit alone. God gathers His covenant community to be an instrument of His saving purpose. **Through His regenerating and sanctifying work, the Holy Spirit grants us faith and enables holiness, so that we may be witnesses of God's gracious presence to those who are lost.** The Spirit gathers us in a community that is built up and equipped to be light, salt, and yeast in the world. Christ sends us into the world to make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that Christ has commanded us. We are now in service to God's plan for the fullness of

time: uniting all things in heaven and earth to Himself. To this end, we preach Christ, calling all persons to repent and believe the gospel. We also care for the natural world, claim all areas of culture in the name of Jesus, serve the poor, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, and defend the helpless. We do this work not with any thought that we are able to bring in the kingdom, but in the confident hope that God's kingdom is surely coming, a day when suffering and death will pass away and when God will live among His people.

### **C. Covenant life in the church**

We are elect in Christ to become members of the community of the new covenant. This covenant, which God Himself guarantees, unites us to God and to one another. Already in the creation, we discover that we are made to live in relationships to others, male and female, created together in God's image. **In Christ, we are adopted into the family of God and find our new identity as brothers and sisters of one another, since we now share one Father.** Our faith requires our active participation in that covenant community.

Jesus prays that His followers will all be one, and so we both pray and work for the union of the church throughout the world. Even where institutional unity does not seem possible, we are bound to other Christians as our brothers and sisters. In Christ the dividing wall of hostility created by nationality, ethnicity, gender, race and language differences is brought down. God created people so that the rich variety of His wisdom might be reflected in the rich variety of human beings, and the church must already now begin to reflect the eschatological reality of people from every tribe, and tongue and nation bringing the treasures of their kingdoms into the new city of God.

**Within the covenant community of the church, God's grace is extended through the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and the faithful practice of mutual discipline.** First, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the word proclaimed may indeed become God's address to us. The Spirit's illuminating work is necessary both for the one who preaches and for those who listen. Second, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs that are linked to the things signified, sealing to us the promises of Jesus. In the baptism of infants, we confess our confidence in God's gracious initiative, that a baby who cannot turn to God is nonetheless claimed as a member of the covenant community, a child of God, cleansed by grace and sealed by the Spirit; in the baptism of adults, we confess our confidence that God's grace can make us new creations at any stage of our lives. In the Lord's Supper, we confess that as we eat the bread and share one cup the Spirit unites us to the ascended Christ, so that His resurrection life may nourish, strengthen and transform us. Third, the community of the Church practices discipline in order to help one another along the path to new life, speaking the truth in love to one another, bearing one another's burdens, and offering to one another the grace of Christ.

#### **D. Faithful stewardship of all of life**

##### **The ministries of the church reflect the three-fold office of Christ as prophet, priest and king - reflected in the church's ordered ministries of teaching elders, deacons, and ruling elders.**

We affirm that men and women alike are called to all the ministries of the Church, and that every member is called to share in all of Christ's offices within the world beyond the church. Every Christian is called to a prophetic life, proclaiming the good news to the world and enacting that good news. Every Christian is called to extend the lordship of Christ to every corner of the world. And every Christian is called to participate in Christ's priestly, mediatorial work, sharing in the suffering of the world in ways that extend God's blessing and offering intercession to God on behalf of the world. We are equipped to share in these offices by the Holy Spirit, who conforms us to the pattern of Christ's life.

##### **Jesus teaches us that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind.**

**There is no part of human life that is off limits to the sanctifying claims of God.** We reject the claim that love of any sort is self-justifying; we affirm that all our affections and desires must be brought under God's authority. We reject the claim that human souls are unaffected by the fall and remain naturally inclined to God; we affirm that soul and body alike must be cleansed and purified in order to love God properly. We reject the claim that the life of the mind is independent from faith; we affirm that unless we believe we cannot properly understand either God or the world around us. Historically, the Presbyterian tradition has been especially called to explore what it is to love God with all our minds, being committed to the on-going project of Christian education and study at all levels of Christian life.

#### **E. Living in obedience to the Word of God**

##### **Progress in holiness is an expected response of gratitude to the grace of God, which is initiated, sustained and fulfilled by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.**

The first response of gratitude is prayer, and the daily discipline of prayer – both individually and together – should mark the Christian life. The life of prayer includes praise to God for His nature and works, sincere confession of our sin, and intercession for the needs of those we know and for the needs of the world.

**As we practice the discipline of regular self-examination and confession, we are especially guided by the Ten Commandments.** We therefore hold one another accountable to:

1. worship God alone, living all of life to His glory, renouncing all idolatry and all inordinate loves that might lead us to trust in any other help;
2. worship God in humility, being reticent in either describing or picturing God, recognizing that right worship is best supported not by our own innovative practices but through the living preaching of the Word and the faithful administration of the sacraments;

3. eliminate from both speech and thought any blasphemy, irreverence, or impurity;

4. observe the Sabbath as a day of worship and rest, being faithful in gathering with the people of God;

5. give honor toward those set in authority over us and practice mutual submission within the community of the church;

6. eradicate a spirit of anger, resentment, callousness, violence, or bitterness, and instead cultivate a spirit of gentleness, kindness, peace, and love; recognize and honor the image of God in every human being from conception to natural death.

7. maintain chastity in thought and deed, being faithful within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman as established by God at the creation or embracing a celibate life as established by Jesus in the new covenant;

8. practice right stewardship of the goods we have been given, showing charity to those in need and offering generous support of the Church and its ministries;

9. pursue truth, even when such pursuit is costly, and defend truth when it is challenged, recognizing that truth is in order to goodness and that its preservation matters;

10. resist the pull of envy, greed and acquisition, and instead cultivate a spirit of contentment with the gifts God has given us.

In Jesus Christ we see the perfect expression of God's holy will for human beings offered to God in our place. His holy life must now become our holy life. In Christ, God's will is now written on our hearts, and we look forward to the day when we will be so confirmed in holiness that we will no longer be able to sin. As the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, Jesus leads us along the path of life toward that goal, bringing us into ever deeper intimacy with the Triune God, in whose presence is fullness of joy.

# The Theological Project

*The Church has a Faith without which she cannot live faithfully.*

Truth leads to duty, faith to practice. A church that wants to be a servant found faithful to its commission must be a steward of the Faith entrusted to its care. A fellowship that desires to be an effective witness to the gospel, must know the gospel. An apostolic church must not only live a life like that of the apostles, it must teach what the apostles' taught.

Some generations of believers have tried to live faithfully without a shared Faith; all have failed. Our generation may be particularly tempted to try. Forging theological consensus is hard work in any generation, but ours seems to have concluded that it is impossible work. Private and partisan interpretations are now considered inflexible and intractable. We have forgotten the humble recognition that ambiguities exist and must be respected, and now dwell in a land where ambiguities are preferred, and certainties are suspect. We are coached to celebrate diversity of theological conviction, rather than seeing this as a sign of important work yet to be done.

Theological debates in the church have not always been filled with grace, or even understanding, and many have been unnecessarily divisive. The formative ecclesial debates of earlier history are viewed as arcane. Doctrinal work is unfavorably compared to relationship building as if the two were mutually exclusive. Teaching elders attempt to teach how to live lives faithful to the truth without doing the required work of laying foundations of the truth in the hearts and minds of the congregation. Ruling elders are equipped to be managers of church life rather than able to teach the Faith.

Although these realities are manifest somewhat differently in churches and among leaders who identify themselves as progressive or evangelical, neglect of the substance of the Faith is wide and deep. As a result, all other matters suffer – the strength of disciples, the health of congregations, the effectiveness of councils. Disciplined attention to the Word gives gifts to the Church that it cannot receive elsewhere or by any other means.

Renewal of theological work at the core of our common life is not only an acknowledged need but, in the providence of God, may be a blessed provision. Throughout history, the reformation of the Church has followed theological work – work that grew from recommitment to the Faith. In turn, the reformation of the Church has fostered a recommitment to theological work.

Now is the time to reengage the theological work, for this moment, and for the next generations.

Renewed commitment to sustained conversation is needed. At its best, sustained conversation is characterized by prayerful and rigorous study of the Scripture with attention to clarifying the Reformed theological lens through which we read the Scriptures, by grateful listening to the voice of the church around the world and through the ages, and application of theological wisdom to every part of life before God and for the world.

Toward these ends, we now commit ourselves to the formation of theological friendships in communities that include all teaching and ruling elders - gatherings of elders which covenant to study and learn together, providing mutual encouragement and accountability for the sake of sustaining and advancing the theological and missional work of the church.

## **Necessary to this commitment are:**

1. Identifying the best practices of current theological projects and relationships within the Church that will help guide the shape of these theological friendships.
2. Building the structures that connect elders with each other locally, regionally, and nationally in environments that establish and sustain theological friendships.

## **These theological friendships should strive to:**

- transform life and ministry,
- be sustained over the years,
- include a breadth of participants
  - gender, age, ethnic and global communities
  - other Reformed churches
  - other orthodox and evangelical theological traditions,
- engage other theological friendships, thus forming broadening communities, worship and witness together.

An invitation is now offered in an excellent resource – “A Pastoral Rule” developed by the Re-forming Ministry Program of the Office of Theology and Worship. This resource invites us to commit to personal disciplines, conduct in ministry that is holy, and mutual encouragement and accountability. It is offered to the whole church as a tool for the formation of theological friendships that sustain us and are sustained over time. We propose that the Fellowship accept that invitation to adapt and then adopt “The Pastoral Rule”.

## **These three theological projects are offered for broad immediate consideration:**

- Recommitment to a particular confessional heritage

as an immediate core constituent of our renewed common life, however that common life is re-formed.  
Identification and affirmation of the essential tenets of the Reformed Faith.  
Commitment to re-engaging the theological enterprise broadly and deeply.

Further advance on these three projects will continue in Orlando as we put our theology on the table for public discussion, deliberation, and decision; share best practices; form theological-missional relationships; build the structures and covenant together.

**Questions for immediate consideration:**

Do we consider the proposal to reaffirm the Book of Confession as we work to build and test theological consensus among us, to be the right judgment to make at this time? Is this an adequate and helpful articulation of the essentials of the Faith as expressed in Reformed ways, and will we sincerely adopt it? What theological friendships will we form, what practices will we commit to, and what structures will we build for mutual encouragement and accountability?

The theological project is required of the Church, and now is re-engaged by this Fellowship within the Church. The invitation is now offered. How will you respond?

## ADDENDUM

*Suggested questions for the covenanting gatherings of theological friends:*

What has the Spirit gathered the Church to be? What has the Spirit sent the Church to do? Always and everywhere; here and now.

What is the authority of Scripture in the actual life of the church? How will we teach and obey the Scripture?

What does it mean to be saved? What is the gospel we are to preach?

What is the shape of our corporate and individual lives that are formed by that gospel?

Elders, Ruling as well as Teaching, are to be equipped to teach. Teach what, to whom, how? Ruling elders are to measure out the patterns of faithfulness for the congregation. What are those patterns, and how are they measured?

In a time of both ecclesial division and realignment, how can schism among parts of the church be diminished and how can reconnection with the whole church be increased?

The Church has a Faith without which she can not live faithfully. What is that Faith? What is faithful living?



The mission of  
The Fellowship of Presbyterians  
is to build *flourishing churches*  
that make *disciples of Jesus Christ*.

## OUR VALUES

### **Jesus-Shaped Identity**

We believe Jesus Christ must be at the center of our lives and making disciples of Jesus at the core of our ministry.

### **Biblical Integrity**

We believe the Bible is the unique and authoritative Word of God, that teaches all that is necessary for faith and life. The prominence of God's Word over our lives shapes our priorities, and the unrivaled authority of the Bible directs our actions to be in concert with Christ's very best for our lives.

### **Thoughtful Theology**

We believe in theological education, constant learning, and the life of the mind; celebrating this as one of the treasures of our Reformed heritage.

### **Accountable Community**

We believe guidance is a corporate spiritual experience. We want to connect leaders to one another in healthy relationships of accountability, synergy, and care.

### **Egalitarian Ministry**

We believe in unleashing the ministry gifts of women, men, and every ethnic group.

### **Missional Centrality**

We believe in living out the whole of the Great Commission — including evangelism, spiritual formation, compassion, and redemptive justice — in our communities and around the world.

### **Center-Focused Spirituality**

We believe in calling people to the core of what it means to be followers of Jesus — what “mere Christianity” is and does — and not fixate on the boundaries.

### **Leadership Velocity**

We believe the work of identifying and developing gospel-centered leaders is critical for the church, and a great leadership culture is risk-taking, innovative, and organic.

### **Kingdom Vitality**

We believe congregations should vigorously reproduce new missional communities to expand the Kingdom of God.