

Discovering Trinity: Beliefs

What follows is a list of some of the distinctives of what our church believes.

Christian

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.—Romans 10:9

One of the difficulties in forming a document like this is that it ends up emphasizing how we are different from other churches. So it is important to begin by stating that what unites us with Christians throughout the world is far more significant than any of the differences we might have with various other traditions and denominations.

Central to who we are is the belief that the Trinitarian God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the God who is worthy of our worship. Purely by his grace, God has rescued the sinful world through his Son, who became truly human and yet truly God and brought redemption by his life, death, and resurrection. All who place their faith in him and declare him to be Lord and Savior are saved.

All churches are united by this. We have one Lord, one faith, one Spirit, one baptism. Everything else is secondary.

This is signified by our membership vows. To become a member of Trinity, you need to acknowledge that you are a sinner, state that your hope is in Christ, and promise to live a life of ongoing repentance. You do not need to agree with all the following distinctives to become a member of our church.

Biblical

“All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.”—Exodus 24:3

But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.—Isaiah 66:2

We believe that worship of the Triune God and submission to the Lordship of Jesus means submitting ourselves in every way to Scripture. This is because we consider the Bible to be God’s authoritative, living, and entirely truthful Word.

This posture towards Scripture inevitably means we will find ourselves out of step at times with the world around us. In fact, we need especially to be careful to be faithful to Scripture in those areas that seem to be the least popular. As one man wrote, “If I profess, with the loudest voice and the clearest exposition, every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christianity.” (E. L. Charles).

Our denomination was formed in the 1970’s largely due to a belief that the larger Presbyterian denomination (the PCUSA) of which we were a part was not being faithful to Scripture in some of the areas in which it was culturally offensive.

What are some examples of controversial positions our church takes as it seeks to submit to Scripture? The danger in trying to answer this is that bullet points do not go nearly far enough in addressing these

complex issues! So if you'd like more information on any of the following, know that there will be a time to address these questions during our Discovering Trinity meeting.

- We believe that salvation is through Christ alone, and that all those who stand outside of Christ on the last day will experience God's eternal judgment.
- We believe that men and women are equally gifted and equally important within the kingdom of God. Yet we also believe that Scripture teaches that the office of elder is open only to godly and qualified men. For a good articulation of this position, see Kathy Keller's *Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles*.
- We believe that sex was created by God to strengthen and express the covenant bond between a husband and wife, as well as for the purpose of their procreation. All sexual activity outside of this marital relationship runs counter to God's design and is prohibited in Scripture.

Reformed

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. —Ephesians 2:8-9

The Reformation (beginning with Martin Luther's nailing the 95 theses in 1517) stands as an important time of renewal in church history, during which God helped his church recover key biblical insights. Perhaps preeminently this period focused many on the reality of God's grace. Salvation comes through Christ alone, which means it is by grace alone, through faith alone.

What is frequently called the "Reformed" tradition began around this time in Switzerland with Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, and perhaps especially John Calvin being teachers who helped form this tradition. It subsequently became very influential in the Netherlands (from which comes the CRC and RCA) and Scotland (the birthplace of Presbyterianism).

Key distinctives of the Reformed tradition include:

1. Giving Scripture primacy over intellect, experience, and tradition in our understanding of all things (*sola Scriptura*).
2. Having a covenantal understanding of the Bible, in which there is great continuity between the Old and New Testaments (more on this later).
3. An emphasis on the sovereign grace of God and the inability of fallen humanity to turn toward God apart from the enlivening work of the Spirit.
4. An emphasis (different from the Lutheran tradition) on how awareness of our salvation fuels obedience and an ethical life.

(See Michael Allen's *Reformed Theology* for a more in-depth description of the Reformed tradition).

Perhaps the most famous distinctive in this list is the third one. Reformed theology is most frequently associated with its understanding of predestination, which often is summarized with the acronym TULIP:

- *Total Depravity*: Humanity is sinful in every part of the self. Our intellect, our desires, our instincts are all corrupted by sin. This means that we are incapable of coming to God on our own. God must draw himself to us. (See Romans 3:10-18)
- *Unconditional Election*: Ephesians 1 is one of a number of places in Scripture that speaks of God "predestining" believers. That is, before people even existed, God had already chosen them to

be his own. This choosing had no “conditions,” he did not choose us based on some admirable quality about us. He chose to love us simply because he chose to love us.

- *Limited Atonement*: While Jesus’ death was more than enough to save the world, there is a real sense in which his death was specifically for his people. (The logic of Romans 8:31-33 only makes sense if this is true).
- *Irresistible Grace*: “Irresistible” is probably a less than helpful way of putting it, as it implies God forcing grace upon us against our will. Rather, the idea here is that God gave us life out of death, opened our eyes in the midst of our blindness. Seeing the beauty of God in the face of Christ, we are inevitably drawn to him. God’s grace is not just an offer: it brings life.
- *Perseverance/Preservation of the Saints*: As Paul writes in Philippians 1, “He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it.” Those who have experienced a saving work of grace in their lives will, by the power of the Spirit, persevere in their faith until the end.

The reason these doctrines are important to us is not that we care deeply about having some airtight system of understanding how God works. Rather, we see these as a crucial part in elevating grace. We can take no credit for our salvation: it is entirely of God.

Covenantal

I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring.
—Genesis 17:7

In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”
—1 Corinthians 11:25

In saying we are covenantal, we are saying that we believe in the fundamental unity of how God saves his people. Both in the Old and New Testaments, God forms a saving covenant with sinful people, a covenant that is founded upon Christ. The old covenant points forward, with the symbolic blood of animals, while the NT covenant celebrates the fulfillment in the blood of Christ. From beginning to end, sinners have always been saved by placing their faith in Christ.

One implication of this is that we see the continuity in the way the signs accompany the covenant. The Old Testament sign of circumcision helps us to understand how the New Testament sign of baptism is to be administered. Just as children in the Old Testament grew up with the sign of circumcision—a sign they took hold of by faith—so also do we believe children of believers grow up with the sign of baptism placed upon them, a sign of God’s covenant that they must take hold of by faith.

Now, to clarify, this is not the Roman Catholic understanding of baptism (where a child’s sin is washed away through the baptism, entirely apart from faith). Here are a few beliefs that we have in common with Baptist churches:

- Baptism is not what saves you. It is a sign of what saves you.
- Baptism must be accompanied by faith in God’s promises for it have effect for the person being baptized.
- Children growing up in Christian homes need to personally come to faith and identify themselves as believing in the gospel. Their being part of a church does not make them Christians.

- Part of godly parenting involves deciding on behalf of the children that these children will be brought up to trust in the gospel and follow Jesus.
- These children of believers belong to the church and should not be treated as outsiders.

The key question that leads to the difference between the Reformed understanding and Baptist understandings is this: *is baptism first and foremost a sign of our faith in God? Or is it first and foremost a sign of God's promises to us?* We believe that, as with circumcision, baptism is first and foremost a sign of God's promises.

When parents bring their child to be baptized, they are, like Joshua, saying, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." They are choosing that their child be brought up to know Christ. Baptism is a sign that the promise their parents believed is also a promise extended to the children.

As a child grows up, he or she come more to understand these promises. Eventually, if God wills, this child increasingly puts his or her faith in these promises, with the knowledge that the sign of baptism has already been extended to them. They are taking hold of their baptism through faith.