

Detailed Beliefs

Our Theological Identity

Often people ask what we at First Presbyterian Church believe. Sometimes the questions are asked these ways: *What are our theological distinctives? What does it mean to be a Presbyterian Church? What does it mean to say we are reformed? Are these issues even important? Do we, in our theological tradition, care about evangelism; that is, winning new people to faith in Jesus Christ?*

While this document may not answer every question of this nature, as elders and under-shepherds of the flock God has given us, we do want to help members, visitors and inquirers learn more about our church.

The Session believes that our church must not fail to make the same vitally important distinctions which the Bible itself makes; yet we hardly insist that every member share the same precise set of theological convictions. Specifically, FPC is and will be characterized accurately with the following terms:

❖ *We are Evangelical*

To say that we are evangelical means that we take our stand with all those who believe in what used to be called "the fundamentals"—that is, those truths which Christians have historically seen as biblically non-negotiable: the existence of God as Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), the deity of Jesus, the virgin birth of Christ, and substitutionary and vicarious death of Christ on the cross, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the promise of Christ's return, and the infallibility and divine authority of the Bible as the only faithful and true guide to what we are to believe and how we are to live. We joyfully affirm our unity with those from every tradition and denomination who hold to these fundamentals including those true believers in Christ who, for whatever reasons, find themselves members of denominations or churches with which we might have certain other disagreements.

❖ *We are Evangelistic*

This means we take seriously the Great Commission, "Go and make disciples of all nations." Without compromising the sovereignty of God, we affirm the responsibility of each person to repent and believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and our responsibility to extend the Gospel invitation as a call to salvation to everyone who hears its message. We invite all, without distinction, to drink freely of the Water of Life and to live eternally. In this way, we seek to "extend the transforming presence of the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ."

❖ *We are Reformed*

The word "Reformed" can be defined simply in two ways: 1) It is a reference to our historical link to the Reformation of the 16th century and intends to describe us as the heirs of that tradition which comes from Luther, Calvin, Knox and other reformers. 2) The word "Reformed" is used most commonly to refer to certain theological distinctives which have marked reformation believers, particularly those in the Calvinist tradition. These distinctives can be summarized by our glad affirmation of the responsibility of every person to repent and believe, and that it is God who, by His sovereign electing grace, draws men and women, otherwise dead in sin, to faith in His Son. By this faith alone are God's people justified. We seek to hold to our reformed convictions humbly, recognizing the sincerity and earnestness of Godly men and women who have other positions.

❖ *We are Confessional*

This means that we have a written confession of faith which we believe accurately summarizes the Bible's teaching. Our confession consists of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the *Larger* and *Shorter Catechisms*. These documents (available in our library and online at www.pcanet.org) are human documents and are therefore not without flaw; yet we believe they do contain carefully worded summaries of the Bible's content. All ruling and teaching elders in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) must vow that they hold to these standards and are required to indicate to their presbyteries or sessions where they take exceptions. It is important to note that every church has a confession, formal or informal, even though some claim they have "no confession but Christ" or "no

creed but the Bible." Every church summarizes its convictions in some form in order to distinguish its members from those who are not believers or those who do not believe in their church's distinctives.

❖ ***We are Covenantal***

To say we are covenantal means we believe that the unifying principle of the Scriptures is the one covenant of grace that God made with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and finally, and most importantly, in Jesus Christ. The covenant is God's pledge or bond of loyalty to His people through each of the above named persons. It is also a relationship of loving loyalty that God has initiated with us as His people throughout human history. To speak of the unity of the covenants means that there is one way and one way only to salvation in both Old and New Testaments--that is, by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. This covenantal understanding of the Bible is in distinction from any system of organizing the Scriptures which would attribute differing ways of salvation to a succession of historical Biblical eras.

❖ ***We are Kingdom-centered***

We believe that the Kingdom of God is not only a future hope but is also a present reality. We believe that because Jesus Christ ascended to heaven He is presently reigning from Heaven and, therefore, we are called upon to recognize his Lordship by honoring and obeying Him in every area of our personal lives and to plant the banner, as it were, of Christ's Kingdom rule in every area of human endeavor.

❖ ***We are Presbyterian***

This word refers to our form of governance, that is, how we "run" the church. We believe that the most clear biblical pattern is for churches to be governed by elders. The Greek word in the New Testament is *presbyteros*—hence the term, "Presbyterianism." Elders rule jointly in a series of what are called "church courts": sessions (local), presbyteries (regional) and the General Assembly (national).

It is important to know that these distinctives are legitimate; that is to say, it is profitable and health-producing for Christians to believe these things. We believe that as we come to appreciate them, we will grow to love and honor the Lord Jesus more fully and understand more richly what it means to live by grace.

Nevertheless, no one who wants to join First Presbyterian Church will ever be required to embrace these distinctives. In fact, one can join and be a participating member of our church without holding to any but the evangelical distinctive. Ruling and teaching elders and deacons, however, must hold to all these distinctives; and while there is room for exceptions to be taken, to be ordained as an elder or deacon in the PCA means that one can affirm that these descriptive terms apply to him.

In the Reformation era, Martin Luther had a sponsor whose name was Frederick of Saxony. Frederick was a prince and a 16th century entrepreneur who funded many of Luther's projects. He was a man of warm heart and deep conviction. On his coach, he had emblazoned these Latin words: *suaviter in modo, fortiter in re*, which means, "gentle in manner, strong in truth." This is what FPC desires to be: warm, gracious, inviting, open and non-judgmental; yet holding strong convictions that always come directly from the Bible. It is our absolute and unwavering conviction that to be strong in truth without being gentle in manner is unbiblical. It is also our profound conviction that to be gentle in manner while not adhering to scriptural truth is also unbiblical. By God's grace, we will be both as we press on in the Lord's grand design to "know Christ and make Him known."

The Session of First Presbyterian Church