

Controversy and Confession: the Reformed Faith in History

Review

- **Goals:** Explain the Reformed faith with clarity, charity, and humility – and without ‘Christianese.’ Cultivate appreciation for the unmatched riches of the Reformed understanding of faith & life. To go “further up and further in” to the living goodness of God’s wonderful grace.
 - **Definition:** The Reformed faith is all of life lived according to the Word of God, by the grace of God, through faith in the Son of God, united by the Spirit of God, to magnify and enjoy God.
 - **Core Idea:** God rules and controls all things in creation, salvation, and history – including human freedom and all seemingly ‘random’ events. (*the sovereignty of God*)
- Today:** Understand the controversies, history, and “origin story” of the Reformed faith:
Where do we come from? What are the major differences between us and other denominations? What should we think about the fact that there is so much conflict in our history?

Doctrinal Controversy in the New Testament Church – *When is it okay to fight?*

- ‘Doctrine’ – an agreed summary of what the church believes/teaches regarding an area of Christian truth
- The Bible shows us that controversy existed in the New Testament church – for good and for ill:

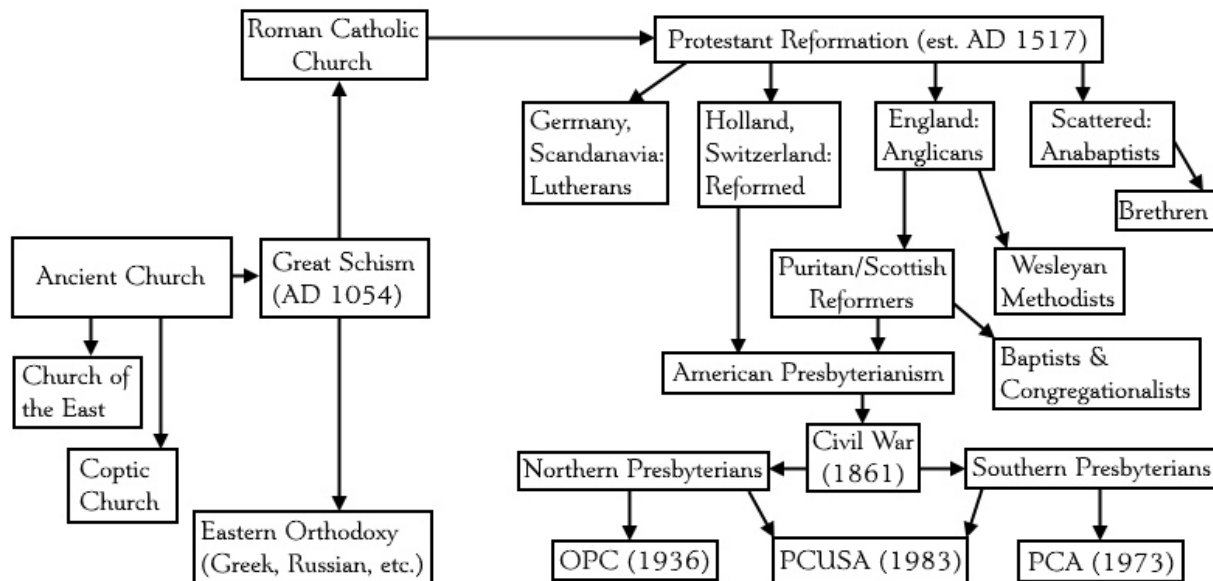
| <i>Warnings against Sinful Controversy</i> | <i>Statements on the Necessity of Conflict</i> |
|---|---|
| <p>If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. (1 Tim. 6:3-5)</p> | <p>But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. (Acts 15:1-2)</p> <p>I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. (Rom. 16:17)</p> |
| <p>Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. (2 Tim. 2:23-26)</p> | <p>Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. (1 Jn. 2:18-19)</p> |
| <p>But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned. (Tit. 3:9-11)</p> | |

- **Sum:** Foolish controversy has been a temptation in the Christian community from the beginning. For the sake of the peace, purity, and unity of the church, some controversy is necessary

The Result of Doctrinal Controversy: Clarification & Creeds

- ‘Creed’ – a formal, written statement of doctrine; like a personal testimony written by the whole church!
- Throughout church history, creeds were created to provide clarity amidst controversy. For example:
 - *Jerusalem Council* (AD 48-49; Acts 15)
 - Apostles and elder author letter clarifying that Gentiles do not need to become culturally Jewish in order to be Christians (Acts 15:22-29). Faith over race: Christian identity supercedes/transcends ethnicity.
 - *Council of Nicaea* (AD 325)
 - In the midst of the Arian controversy,¹ church leaders affirm that Jesus Christ is fully God, of the same essence with God the Father. Their affirmation becomes the foundation of the Nicene Creed, in which we thus confess that Jesus is “begotten of his Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made...”
 - *Council of Constantinople* (AD 381)
 - In the midst of continued controversy over Arianism, the Nicene Creed is expanded to clarify that the Holy Spirit is also fully God: “the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]; who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified...”
 - *Council of Chalcedon* (AD 451)
 - As continued confusion and conflict in various regions of the church surrounding the person of Jesus, church leaders issued the “Definition of Chalcedon” which clarifies the Bible’s teaching on who Jesus Christ is: he is fully God and fully man, two natures in one person – without separation, conversion, composition, or confusion between his Godhood and his manhood.
- Besides providing clarity in times of controversy, these creeds become the “statements of faith” for future ‘denominations’ of Christians. The Nicene Creed is still the central creed of Eastern Orthodox churches.

Our Path through History: the Family Tree of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC)²

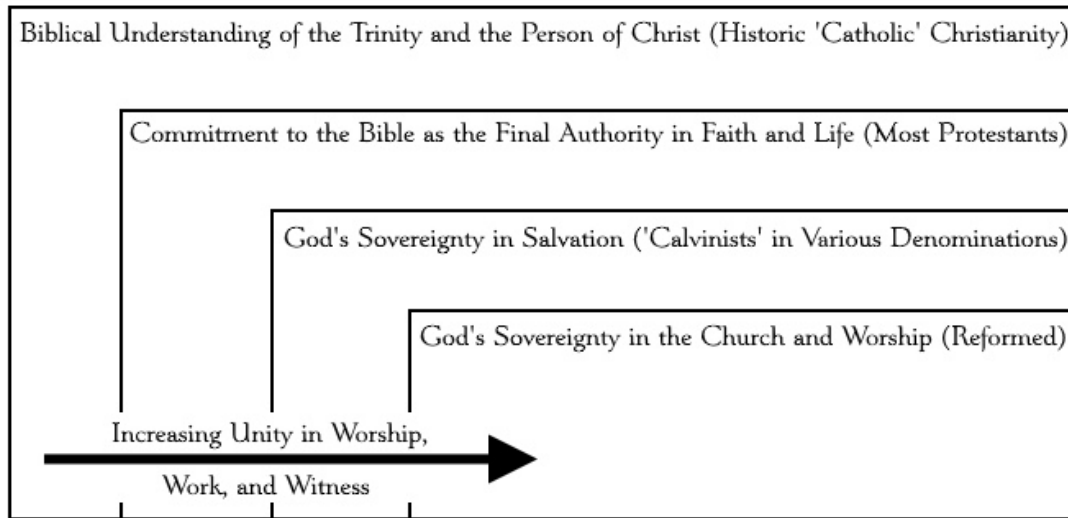


¹ Arianism was an early Christian cult or ‘heresy’ (a soul-destroying, false teaching), which taught that Jesus Christ was not fully God, but rather the first being created by God. Modern day “Jehovah’s Witnesses” believe similarly.

² This diagram adapted/expanded from an earlier diagram prepared by Rev. Dr. Matthew H. Patton.

“As United As Possible” – Unity of the Faith without Abandoning Clarity

- “I hope no reader will suppose that ‘mere’ Christianity is here put forward as an alternative to the creeds of the existing communions—as if a man could adopt it in preference to Congregationalism or Greek Orthodoxy or anything else. It is more like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms. If I can bring anyone into that hall I shall have done what I attempted. But it is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals. The hall is a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in.” (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, preface)
- It may be helpful to think of our unity with other Christians in terms of concentric rings:



- How does this unity work out in practice?
 - Historically ‘Catholic’ Christians – allies in many cultural and religious freedom advocacy
 - Most Protestants – can pray together, study the Bible together
 - ‘Calvinists’ – work together to produce Bible translations/commentaries
 - Reformed – all of the above to a greater degree + other joint activities
 - deep unity in worship, work, and witness; joint missions

How Do We at Covenant Presbyterian Church Pursue Christian Unity? – some examples:

- *Locally*
 - When new members come to us from other churches, we touch base with their former churches
 - When invited and able, our pastors will counsel, teach, and/or pray with other church leaders
 - Our church hosts Bible Quizzing and Reformation Conferences to serve other local churches
- *Regionally*
 - Pastor Patton was instrumental in working with other local leaders to establish the Miami Valley chapter of the national Gospel Coalition (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>)
 - Pastor Peppo is especially active in reaching out to regional churches outside our denomination
 - Pastor Montgomery has had some contact with leaders from a local Chinese church
- *Denominationally*
 - Our denomination (OPC) is a member of two inter-denominational councils: the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Churches (NAPARC), and the International Council of Reformed Churches (ICRC), through which we cooperate on numerous matters of common concern
 - When he served overseas, Pastor Montgomery worked as part of a joint PCA-OPC team