

Foundational Christian Doctrines

By Scott Sauls

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried, He descended into hell. The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost. I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through Him all things were made. For us and for our salvation He came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate; He suffered death and was buried. On the third day He rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

What is Reformed Theology?

Reformed Theology is the body of biblical teaching that was rediscovered by those commonly known as the Protestant Reformers, beginning with Martin Luther in 1517 A.D. Throughout church history, the tenets of Reformed Theology have been embraced by people such as St. Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, Matthew Henry, and Jonathan Edwards. More contemporary adherents include Francis Schaeffer, J.I. Packer, John Stott, Eugene Peterson, James Montgomery Boice, and R.C. Sproul. A good summary of Reformed Theology is given in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

The Five "Points" of Reformed Theology

The five "points" of Reformed Theology have to do with *how* a person comes to faith in Jesus and continues as a follower of Jesus until the end. The five points are a helpful tool to enable us to understand *God's* part and *our* part in the process of knowing and following Him.

Point 1—Each human being enters life with a fallen heart that is *dead* to the things of God.

Unaided by a power outside ourselves, we are "spiritual corpses" incapable of responding to spiritual things (Ephesians 2:1, 4-5, 8). Ephesians tells us, "As for you, *you were dead* in your transgressions and sins... But because of his great love for us, *God*, who is rich in mercy, *made us alive* with Christ *even when we were dead* in transgressions—it is *by grace* you have been saved... For it is *by grace* you have been saved, through *faith—and this not from yourselves*, it is the *gift of God*" (Eph 2:1, 4, 8). The major implication here is that in their natural condition, *people are powerless on their own* to turn from sin and trust in Jesus. As is the case for a physical corpse, a spiritual corpse is *incapable of raising itself* to life. An outside influence is necessary, or the corpse will remain helplessly dead. So, for spiritual life to begin, *GOD* must first act upon and breathe spiritual life into the human heart. Jesus himself says that "*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him* (lit., "drags" or "compels"), and I will raise him up at the last day. The word translated "draws" was used in ancient times to refer to the drawing of water from a well, which of course depends completely upon the force and strength of the one pulling the water from the well. A summary of the four different views on how a person comes to faith in Christ are as follows:

- *Works without faith (moralistic religious view)*. This view states that if a person wants to be in relationship with God and secure his favor, the person must do so by living a life of good works. His standing before God is solely determined upon the things he does with his life, whether good or bad.
- *Faith plus works (Roman Catholic view)*. This view states that if a person wants to be in relationship with God and secure his favor, the person must do so by "doing his part." It is Jesus' job to die to secure my forgiveness, but it is my job to add to his work a host of my own meritorious good works, so as to secure his favor.
- *Faith as a work (Arminian Christian view)*. This view states that if a person wants to be in relationship with God and secure his favor, the person must do so by "exercising his faith muscles." God has done everything for us. Now all we must do is exercise our free will to trust Jesus and follow him. Then we receive favor from God.
- *Faith as a gift from God, not by works (Reformational Christian view)*. This view states that no person will ever want to be in relationship with God, or care to secure his favor, unless and until God intervenes. Scripture teaches that we enter our existence spiritually dead, unable to raise ourselves to spiritual life. As such, if we have faith in Christ, we may assume that this is the case solely because God intervened to change our hearts, to "regenerate" us as it were, so that our hearts are now disposed to trust and follow Christ (John 6:37, 44; Ephesians 2; etc.).

Natural humanity, apart from the work of God's Spirit, possesses a heart that is *polluted* by his fallen condition (Genesis 6:5; Psalm 51:5; Romans 3:9-19, 8:5-8). Apart from God's intervention, every inclination of the thoughts of our hearts are only evil always (Genesis 6:5). Apart from an act of God on the heart, there is no one who seeks God, not even one (Romans 3:11).

NOTE: We will only be able to embrace the next four points to the degree that we are able to embrace this one—that we are dead to the things of God unless and until God does a resurrecting work on our hearts.

Point 2—God, motivated by His predetermined saving love, chose some from the human race to be His children, before time began.

These people the Bible calls His “elect” (Jeremiah 1:5; Romans 9:11; Ephesians 1:4-5; 2 Thessalonians 2:13). (God) *chose* us in Jesus *b/4* the creation of this world, to be holy & blameless in His sight. *In love He predestined* us to be adopted as His sons, *in accordance w/His pleasure & will* (Ephesians 1:4-5). Some implications include:

- *We choose Jesus because Jesus first chose us* (John 1:12-13; 15:16; Acts 13:48). The implication of this is that one can make a “decision for Jesus” (to trust and follow him) only if Jesus has already made a decision for him/her.
- *God therefore chose His children not on the basis of a foreseen knowledge* of who would receive Jesus, but rather on the basis of His unique, targeted, saving love for each of His children.
- *God chose also, by His own volition, not to save others*, but rather to “pass them over” to the end that they receive justice for their sin (Romans 9:6ff.):

It is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel...10 There was Rebekah...when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born & had not done anything good or bad, so that God’s purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!...18 God has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. (Romans 9:6ff.)

Some related implications:

- ▶ God is just, but He is not “fair” in an ultimate sense. If He were, He would save no one. To be fair in the ultimate sense would be to give all people what they actually deserve. Lord, spare us from fairness!
- ▶ God is *not* to blame for the hardness of a person’s heart toward Him and toward Jesus (Romans 1:18-24). One of the more difficult statements in Scripture is that God “hardens” the hearts of some (i.e., Pharaoh in the book of Exodus). To be consistent with the rest of Scripture (which is its own best interpreter), we have to conclude that God does not *actively* place evil in people’s hearts, but rather *leaves some people in their natural state* of depravity and opposition toward him. When it says in Romans 1:24, for example, that God “hands people over” – it is important to see that he hands people over not to something new and different, but to be their natural, fallen *selves*. As Martin Luther once said, we are all like caterpillars suspended in the midst of a ring of fire. The only deliverance for us is from above. Unless God rescues us, we are undone.

Point 3—Jesus died an atoning, substitutionary death specifically on behalf of His children. (Matthew 22:14; Luke 1:68; John 6:37; 17:9-10, 24). On the basis of these and other Scriptures, it seems clear that Jesus *did* die for those who believe in Him, but *not* on behalf of those who reject Him. When Jesus died on the cross, it was with a view toward effectively saving *all* the people that He had already determined to save.

- *If Jesus died for those who reject him, there would be no need for those who reject him to be sentenced to eternal punishment.* This would mean that the non-believer’s sin has been paid for twice—once by himself, and once by Jesus. This makes sense neither logically nor biblically. God is completely just—and this kind of arrangement (a “double payment” for someone’s sin) would not be just (1 Peter 3:18).
- *If Jesus died for those who reject him, then God’s plan has failed*, because this would imply that Jesus’ blood has been ineffective to save those who do not trust Him for salvation. It would mean that God is not sovereign over the hearts of people—which biblically is not an option to be considered.

An important question—What about the Scriptures that seem to say that Jesus died with the whole world in view (John 3:16), and that God wants all people to be saved and brought to a knowledge of Jesus (1 Timothy 2:3-4)?

- In the Bible, “world” does not always mean “world” in an absolute sense, and “all” does not always mean “all” in an absolute sense (Revelation 7:9). In saying that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son...(John 3:16), Scripture expresses that Jesus died for all *sorts* of people (from every nation, tribe and tongue (Revelation 7:9), not for all people without exception. Think of it in terms of a party – when you say the next morning that “everyone was there at the party,” you don’t literally mean “everyone” but rather “a large representation of the whole.”
- There is a difference between God’s will of *decree* and His will of *disposition*.
 - ▶ God’s will of *decree*: God has decreed (predetermined) from before time those who would come to Him through faith in Jesus. Not only does He *desire* that these be saved; He actually *saves* them by applying Jesus’ blood to them—giving them the gift of faith (John 6:37, 44).
 - ▶ God’s will of *disposition*: Mysteriously, Scripture also clearly teaches that God takes *no pleasure* in the death of anyone. In that sense, He “desires” for all people to be saved from His wrath. Nonetheless, in His justice He allows some, whose souls He loves, to be left in their sin and perish in it. To us, this is a mystery that cannot be fully comprehended, but we accept it by faith because God has said it to be so (Ezekiel 18:32, 33:11; Matthew 23:37).

Another important question: How do I know I am one of those for whom Jesus died? Simply put, those who trust in Jesus and who want to obey Him can be absolutely certain that they are children of God, for whom Jesus died (Matthew 7:16; 1 John 5:13). As John, the beloved disciple writes, I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may *know* that you have eternal life.

Point 4—The Holy Spirit will absolutely and completely secure the salvation of every person whom God wants to save. Of those God has chosen, not one will He fail to save.

- *If God has called/chosen a person to be his child, then that person will most certainly respond to the Gospel with faith, because the Holy Spirit always captures the hearts of those God intends to save (John 6:37-39, 17:1-2; Acts 13:48).*
- *God's grace can be resisted by the natural human heart, but it cannot be resisted by the heart that has been awakened to God by the Holy Spirit. A person who has been awakened by God from spiritual death must necessarily respond to the Gospel message with faith and repentance. In this sense, God's grace is "irresistible."*

An important question—What about free will? Doesn't God give us freedom to choose Christ or reject Him?

- Our belief is that the will of *God* is always stronger than the will of *man*. Therefore, if God pursues a person for salvation, God will *always* succeed and never fail in His purpose to capture a person's heart, no matter how resistant that person is to Him initially (Acts 8:1, 9:1-19). A Scriptural example is that of Saul of Tarsus, who (in Acts 8) is officiating at the unjust execution of Stephen, a devout Christian and deacon of the church! In Acts 9 Saul is then on his way to persecute more Christians in Damascus – and Jesus blinds him on the side of the road and changes his life forever. Those the Lord pursues, the Lord ultimately saves. What grace!
- Our belief is that the will of *man* is free, in the sense that he is free to choose according to what his heart *desires*. A person will always choose what he/she *wants*—and the heart that has not been awakened by the Spirit is only able to choose, ultimately, *against* the will of God (Romans 6:20-22). When you don't have the Spirit, you do indeed have the capacity to do "good things"—but often for reasons that are self-centered not God-centered. For instance, many people who reject Christ obey the speed limit—but the fundamental reason is not to "do good" as much as it is to avoid the penalty of a traffic ticket. The point is, we are free to "choose Jesus," and free to accept and follow his will *from the heart and not just to avoid a consequence*, precisely because he has given our wills the freedom to do so by resurrecting our dead hearts, giving us spiritual life that is now, because of the Spirit he has given us, inclined to do good for God's sake rather than for our own self-protection (see Ephesians 2).

Another important question—If God will save whom He wishes, then why do we need to reach out and tell others about Jesus? Can't God save people without us? The response is that God not only ordains the *end*, but also the *means* to accomplish it. In Romans 10:1-15 (which immediately follows a full chapter of Paul's teaching on the doctrine of election!) Paul writes, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

Point 5—The Holy Spirit will absolutely and completely preserve the true Christian believer until the end.

In other words, *once a Christian, always a Christian*. It is categorically impossible to lose your relationship with Jesus once you have truly possessed it. The basis of our preservation is the *promise* and *power* of a sovereign God, who pledges without fail to keep us as His own (John 6:37-40, 10:27-29, 17:10; Romans 8:35-39; Philippians 1:6).

An important question—What about those who "fall away" from the Christian faith and return to a life of sin? What about those who renounce the faith in Jesus that they once had?

- *It is possible for a true Christian to fall away for a season of time, but because he/she belongs to God, God will ultimately bring him/her back to Himself (Luke 15:11-32, 22:31-34).* A great example of this is the parable of the lost son in Luke 15. Another is Peter's thrice-denial of Jesus (see Luke 22:31-34). Peter, after boldly denying three times that he ever knew Jesus, was restored beautifully by Jesus. The point is, although it may appear that a Christian has "shipwrecked his faith," only God can ultimately judge the heart. Peter never became a non-Christian during his time of betrayal, even though for a time it appeared as if he had.
- *It is possible for a non-Christian to appear to be an authentic believer, when in actuality he/she is a "wolf in sheep's clothing" (John 17:12; 1 John 2:19).* For example Judas, one of Jesus' primary followers, looked the part but was never authentic in his love for Jesus. He kept the money bag. He was a disciple for 3 years like the rest. He seemed so real that at the last supper, none of the disciples knew who the betrayer was. As 1 John 2:19 says, They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained w/us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us

The Five Foundations of Reformed Theology

The following five "foundations" are what Reformed Theology regards as "essentials," or, said differently, the major teachings of Scripture that are adhered to by every Christian throughout the ages. The foundations are:

Foundation 1—Reformed Theology teaches a patently God-centered approach to faith and life.

All of reality sits under the influence and direction of God's supremacy. This means several things:

First, we can know our true selves only to the degree that we understand who God is. When confronted with the perfect character and nature of a holy God (as He is revealed in Scripture), only then can we understand our own sinfulness and consequent alienation from God and need for His grace. And only then can we understand how intensely valuable we are as those created in God's image (Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:6-8).

Second, God is the sovereign creator and sustainer of all things, including human life. Humanity did not evolve from other life forms (macroevolution). God created human beings with dignity as the only creatures bearing His image. The ultimate purpose for which He created us is to glorify and enjoy Him (Genesis 1:26; Psalm 8:5, 139:14; Colossians 3:17).

Third, restoration, or "salvation," is the work of God from start to finish. Because we were born spiritually dead in our transgressions and sins, we had no initial capacity in ourselves to come unaided to Jesus as our Lord and Savior. It is only by His first pursuing us that we could then pursue Him (Ephesians 2:1, 5; John 3:3, 15:16).

Fourth, the whole of life, both personal and public, is to be committed to God. As far as the life of the Christian is concerned, there is no distinction between the "sacred" and the "secular," because the understood purpose of *all* of life for the Christian is to bring glory to God, whether through our work, play, rest, relationships or worship (1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:23-24).

Foundation 2—Reformed Theology derives its affirmations/beliefs from the Bible alone.

Reformed Theology teaches that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, is without error in its original manuscripts, and contains everything we need to know about having a right relationship with Him and our fellow human beings. As such, the Bible is the basis for *all* Christian beliefs (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21). Rather than determine truth by our own opinions and personal feelings (which can be very inconsistent and self-serving), we seek truth from God, the Author and Giver of all truth. To deviate from any of the clear teachings of Scripture in what we believe, say or do is to exchange the truth of God for a lie—and, in the words of Martin Luther, "is neither right nor safe." The Bible alone (concerning all issues about which it speaks), therefore, must be the ultimate determining factor of both what we believe and how we live (John 14:6; Romans 1:25).

Foundation 3—Reformed Theology affirms that we are saved by faith alone.

This means several things:

First, our acceptance in the sight of God is contingent upon faith, and faith *alone* (Romans 3:21-24; Ephesians 2:8-9).

Second, it is impossible for us as sinful people to earn favor from God by doing good things. While there are many noble and praiseworthy things that people do, none of them is good enough to gain merit with God, because God's only acceptable standard is absolute, sinless *perfection* (Matthew 5:48; Romans 3:23).

Third, this standard of perfection has been met by one Person, the God-Man Jesus. By personally trusting in His substitutionary life and death, his record is credited to us by God—as if it were us, not Jesus, who lived the perfect and acceptable life that he lived. Through the life and death of Jesus we are made *by* God to be acceptable in the sight of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Fourth, the consequent fruit of faith in Christ is a life of love or "good works," which God has prepared for us to do. Our being justified (declared not guilty by God) through faith in Jesus will gradually and necessarily lead to personal character that seeks to love God and do what He commands (Ephesians 2:8-10; John 14:15; Philippians 2:13). As Martin Luther once said, "We are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that *is* alone." Jesus stated clearly that the evidence of true conversion is that our lives begin, over a period of time, to reflect his beautiful character (Luke 6:46; Ephesians 2:10). The common teaching of "Carnal Christianity" (the idea that a person can have Jesus as Savior without following him) is inconsistent with biblical teaching.

Foundation 4—Reformed Theology is Christ-centered.

In other words, Jesus is the one and only *head* of the church and as such is the sole governor of the Christian believer's conscience. Thus, we look to Jesus as God's ultimate and final prophet, priest, and king:

As prophet, Jesus is the final "Word" of God to the world. Anyone who has seen Jesus has seen God Himself, because Jesus is the "radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being" (John 1:1, 14, 14:9; Hebrews 1:3). Some implications of Jesus as prophet include:

- Jesus' words are given to be received, embraced and followed as the very words of God (John 6:29; Luke 6:46; John 14:23).
- As prophet, Jesus is the one and only mediator between God and His people (1 Tim 2:5), and, therefore, is the one and only way to a right relationship with Him (John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

As priest, Jesus serves us in two capacities:

- He stands as our substitute, in that He lived the perfect life in our place (to satisfy *for us* God's demand for perfect righteousness) and died a shameful death in our place (to satisfy *for us* God's justice toward our sin).
- He stands as our intercessor. Without ceasing, He prays for us to the Father (John 17:20-26; Hebrews 7:25).

As King, Jesus has assumed authority over not only us as the members of God's Kingdom, but also over the entire universe. Currently, He rules the lives of all His people in that we submit to Him by obeying His commands, but the day will soon come when "every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (King), to the glory of God the Father" (Psalm 2; Isaiah 9:6-7; Matthew 28:18; John 14:15; Philippians 2:10-11).

Foundation 5—Reformed Theology affirms three biblical covenants.

These three covenants are what make up the basis of God's relationship with those who trust in Jesus:

First, there is the covenant of redemption, which is the only covenant that does not directly include human beings. It consists of God's plan to redeem (purchase back both for Himself and from Himself) His cherished people. From eternity past, the three persons of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) have been unified in purpose to apply the gift of salvation freely to each one of God's chosen people (Psalm 139:16; Jeremiah 1:5; Ephesians 1:4-5). So precious are we in his sight, that God regards us as his special gift to his Son (John 17:6). Aspects of the redemption covenant include:

- God the *Father* chose or predestined who would be His elect (Ephesians 1:4-5).

- God the *Son* (Jesus) accomplished the work necessary to purchase our pardon and give us right standing before God as Judge (2 Corinthians 5:21).
- God the *Spirit* applies the work of the Son to our hearts and lives, thus making the Father's call effective (John 3:3-10; Ephesians 2:4-5).

Second, there is the covenant of works, which was the first covenant initiated by God with the human race. In this covenant, "life was promised to Adam; and in him to his descendants (the human race), upon condition of perfect obedience" (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Genesis 2:16-17).

- The penalty for violating this covenant (through sin) was and is *death*. All people who are not under the protection of the covenant of grace (see below) are bound by the covenant of works and its ultimate penalty. Because Adam, and, consequently, the entire human race, has failed to keep this covenant, we all enter the world under the sentence of death (Genesis 2:16-17; Romans 3:23).
- Even Christians will be judged by this covenant on the last day. The difference, however, is that they will be judged by the works of *Jesus* rather than by their own (because of the covenant of grace, as described below).

The final covenant (Covenant Theology)

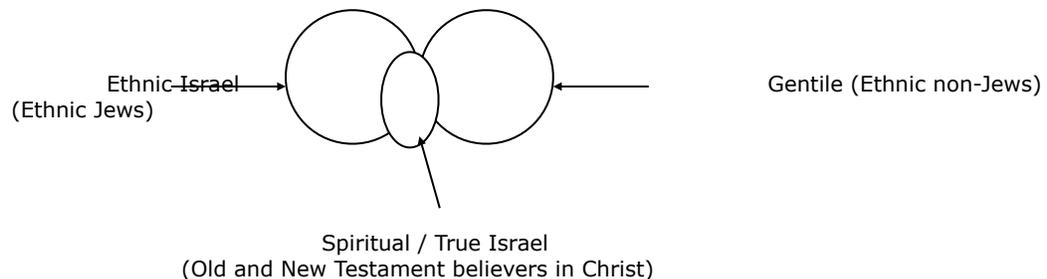
The third and final biblical covenant (continuing from last week's "Driving it Home" article) is *the covenant of grace*.

The meaning of this covenant: Throughout Scripture, beginning with Genesis 3:15 and culminating with Revelation 22, God has provided salvation by *one* means and one only: by *grace* (His undeserved, unearned favor) through *faith* (personal trust) in Jesus alone. Old Testament Christians looked *ahead* in time by faith in Jesus Christ as their promised Savior. Since New Testament times, Christians have looked *back* in time by faith in Jesus: "Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, (Jesus) explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures *concerning himself*" (Luke 24:27). Some implications include:

First, there has been one (and only one) plan of salvation since the fall of Adam in Genesis 3. This plan is salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Here is how that plan has played out through history:

- **Genesis 3:15—The first presentation of the Gospel.** As early as Genesis 3, Adam (and the human race) is given the promise that the "seed of the woman" (fulfilled in Jesus) will crush the head of the serpent (representing Satan). This is the earliest form of God's promise to deliver his people from the brokenness, oppression, and evil brought about by the entrance of sin into the world and into their lives in particular.
- **Genesis 15:6; Galatians 3:26-29; Romans 9:6—The Abrahamic covenant** fulfilled ultimately by Abraham's *spiritual* offspring, that is, those who trust in Christ or the true "Israel of God" (Romans 9:6). In the book of Genesis, God promises to Abraham that he will have descendants that are as numerous as the stars in the sky and grains of sand by the sea. The fulfillment of this promise, though certainly having an ethnic fulfillment in the birthing and development of the nation of Israel, is ultimately a *spiritual* fulfillment, as we are taught that all those who belong to Christ *by faith* (whether ethnically Jewish or Gentile) are Abraham's seed and heirs according to God's promise (Galatians 3:29). Hopefully the diagram provided below will help to shed light on the nature of the true, spiritual "Israel of God:"

The "Israel of God"—Ethnically inclusive and spiritual in substance:



- **Exodus 20:1-2**—In *the Mosaic covenant* (God's covenant with Israel through Moses) Israel's deliverance from Egypt foreshadows the Gospel of Christ. Their deliverance from slavery symbolizes the Christian's deliverance from sin through the power of the Spirit working through the Gospel.
- **2 Samuel 7:11b-16**—In *the Davidic covenant* (God's covenant with David to give him a "son" who would reign on his throne forever) Jesus is the long-term fulfillment, whose government would never cease to increase, and who would "reign on David's throne and over his kingdom" forever (Isaiah 9:7). This covenant is an example of what theologians call "prophetic foreshortening"—meaning that there are several prophecies in Scripture that have both a short-term fulfillment (the birth of Solomon, David's son) which points to an ultimate long-term fulfillment (the coming of Jesus, the Son of God descended from David's genetic line). Some implications regarding the Davidic covenant:

In Old Testament times, the concept of God's Kingdom is that of a *theocratic* (ruled by God) government in which God ruled over the *ethnic* nation of Israel through a king (i.e., David), who received the laws of the land through God's spokesmen, the prophets.

In New Testament times, and until Jesus returns, the concept of God's Kingdom is still that of a theocratic (ruled by God) government, but one in which God rules over the *spiritual* nation of Israel (as described above) through the eternal King (Jesus), who now speaks by His Spirit through the Bible.

- **Jeremiah 31:31-34**—In the **new covenant**, the full picture of the covenant of grace is portrayed. The new covenant is first introduced by the prophet Jeremiah:

The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

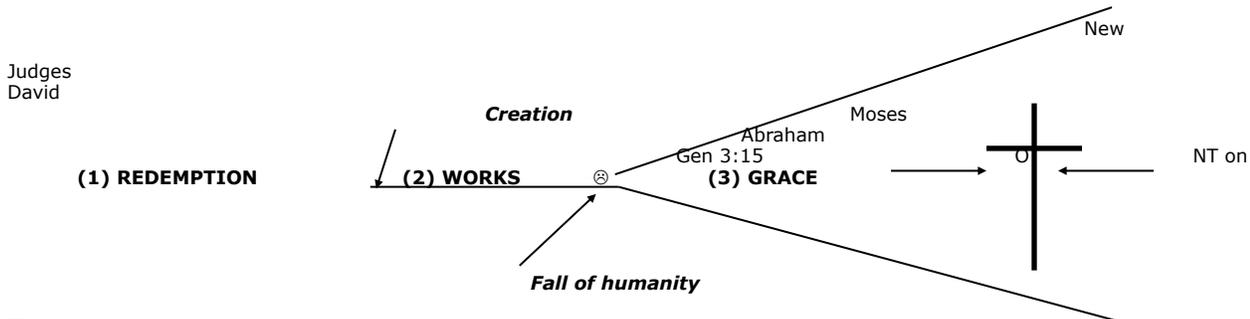
Some points of clarification about the new covenant:

First, the new covenant is NEW in that it explicitly, overtly, and deliberately includes all *nations* on earth as beneficiaries of the covenant of grace (see Matthew 28:19; Galatians 3:28-29), and it begins a new era in which the ministry of the *Holy Spirit* takes the forefront (Acts 2:17-21).

Second, the new covenant is NOT NEW in that salvation is still by grace through faith in Jesus as it has *always* been since the fall (Romans 10:9, 13), and the core covenant promise that the Lord will be our God and we will be His people is the same (Genesis 17:8-9; Jeremiah 31:33; Acts 2:38-39; Revelation 21:3).

The "big picture" of redemptive history:

The following diagram summarizes the history of the unfolding of the covenant of grace:



The covenant sacraments.

A *sacrament* is an ordinance initiated by Jesus Christ, and is an *external* sign representing the *internal* reality of the covenant of grace at work in the Christian and his household. In the New Testament, there are *two* such sacraments:

The first sacrament is the covenant meal, also known as communion or the Lord's Supper.

This sacrament is the completed expression of the Old Testament Passover (Exodus 12:23-27; Matthew 26:26-29; 1 Corinthians 5:7; 11:17-34), and is a "meal" of bread and wine which gives us a visible, tangible expression of the love-sacrifice Jesus made for his followers, by both living and dying in their place. There are essentially four basic views of the Lord's Supper:

First, there is the Roman Catholic view (transubstantiation). Roman Catholics believe that the substance of the bread and wine is miraculously transformed into Christ's physical body and blood. The elements then appear to be bread and wine, but in actuality are the literal body and blood of Jesus, which are "eaten" by the worshipper. Roman Catholics view the Lord's Supper as representing what they refer to as the "continuing sacrifice" of the Son of God for sins.

The Lutheran view (consubstantiation). Lutherans believe that Christ's physical body and blood are literally "in, with, and under" the bread and wine, which itself remains bread and wine.

The Zwinglian view (memorial or Baptist). The Zwinglian view teaches that the glorified Christ is not present in any unique way during the observance of the Lord's Supper. Rather, His presence is localized in heaven, at the right hand of the Father. The Lord's Supper, therefore, is merely a memorial of His death, something believers remember as a way to be encouraged about God's love for them in the Gospel.

The Reformational view (memorial and means of grace) is the view taken by this paper. The Reformational view teaches that while the bread and wine remain unchanged in themselves, the Holy Spirit works in the Christian through faith to enjoy the actual, spiritual presence of Christ and the benefits of His death in a way that is glorious and real, though indescribable. In summary, this "presence" means three things:

Lord's Supper as commemoration. As the Zwinglian view teaches, the Lord's Supper is in fact a *commemoration* or memorial. We remember the death of Christ and its benefits, and are encouraged by what the bread and cup represent (the body and blood of Christ).

Lord's Supper as communion. The Lord's Supper is also a *communion* or fellowship. We enjoy the fellowship of both the risen Christ and His church, the members of His body. In biblical times, the Lord's Supper was most often, if not always, celebrated in the setting of an agape (love) feast, where Christians would come together for a huge, celebratory meal, part of which was to welcome and enjoy the real, spiritual presence of Christ among them as they shared the Lord's Supper together.

Lord's supper as anticipation. The Lord's Supper is a confident *anticipation*. It is a reminder to us that we have a certain hope that Christ will return from heaven, where He will affectionately receive us as His Bride at the "wedding feast of the Lamb." We will then live directly in His loving presence forever.

The second sacrament is the covenant *sign*, also known as baptism.

This sacrament is the full expression of the Old Testament circumcision (Genesis 17:7, 9-11; Acts 2:37-39; Colossians 2:11-12). As is the case with the Lord's Supper, professing Christians have varying views on the nature and meaning of baptism:

First, there is the Zwinglian view ("believer's" baptism). According to this view, baptism is a public, formal symbol of our inward washing by the Holy Spirit, and is reserved only for those who have professed Christ as their King and Deliverer. Baptism is seen primarily as one's public "testimony" or profession of faith.

Second, there is the view of both Roman Catholics and traditional Lutherans (baptismal regeneration). In this view, baptism is given to adults and infants alike. At the time a person is baptized, he or she immediately and automatically receives the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Third, there is the Reformational view (household sign of the covenant of grace), which is the view assumed in this paper. This view teaches that baptism is a sign and seal of one's inclusion in the covenant of grace (as a ring is a sign of the marriage covenant), and is to be given to Christians and their children. In the case of infant or child baptism, the sacrament itself does not ensure the child's salvation, nor is there necessarily any instantaneous filling with the Holy Spirit connected to the water. A child's baptism becomes fully effective when he or she receives the Gospel by faith. Prior to this time, the child is considered a "non-communing member" of the church, and is entitled to the same oversight, care, and instruction as a communing member. However, a non-communing member of the church may not celebrate the Lord's Supper until faith in Christ is declared.

Three modes of baptism. There are three modes of baptism commonly practiced by Christians. These are sprinkling, pouring, and immersion. Generally, but not exclusively, those from a reformational heritage use the mode of sprinkling (Ezekiel 36:24-27; Hebrews 10:22).

Two recipients of baptism. Those from a reformational heritage believe there are two qualified recipients of baptism:

- First, there are *adults and children who have professed faith* in Christ (Acts 2:41; 8:36-38).
- Second, there are the *children of Christian parent(s)* who have not yet made a profession of faith in Christ, but who are under the authority of their parent(s). Some reasons for the inclusion of such "covenant" children are:

Continuity between circumcision and baptism (Genesis 17:12-13; Acts 2:38-39; Colossians 2:11-12). In and since the New Testament era, baptism replaced circumcision as the sign of the covenant. Circumcision was given on the 8th day of a child's infancy. Baptism replaces circumcision as the fuller expression of the outward sign of God's covenant with his people (Colossians 2:11-12).

The sainthood attributed by the New Testament to the children of Christian believers (Luke 18:15-17; Acts 2:38-39; 1 Corinthians 7:14). The New Testament teaches that the children of at least one believing parent are to be regarded as "holy" (from the Greek *hagia*, the same word used elsewhere in the New Testament for "saints"). The promise of the Spirit is given to both Christians and their children (Acts 2:38-39). Implied is that covenant children (the children of believers in Christ) are to be *regarded* as believers unless or until they prove themselves to be otherwise. As such, Christian parents will teach their children to pray, read and understand the Bible, and follow Jesus long before any profession of faith is made by the child.

Evidence from church history. It is a well-attested fact that household baptism, which included the baptism of infants and children of believing parents, was the universal practice of the early church. For example, Irenaeus (disciple of Polycarp, who was disciple of the apostle John) writes of the practice of infant baptism in the early church. Tertullian (end of 2nd century) also speaks of the practice. Origen (2nd & 3rd century historian) does also. Additionally, there is no written early church record of even so much as a debate about infant baptism (all practices that were "questionable" resulted in debates and councils, all of which are well-documented in the historic record). An absence of any record of debate indicates a significant likelihood that infant baptism was accepted and practiced without question in the early church. This all being said, a Gospel-centered "reformational" church will nonetheless treat this as a non-essential, and will therefore refuse to judge or look down upon those who hold to a different position on baptism. Ultimately, each person should follow his or her own conscience on this matter.