

# HOW OUR REFORMED FAITH INFORMS OUR TEACHING WITH ADULTS

Recent studies indicate that only about half of our church members grew up Presbyterian, and many of these left our Presbyterian congregations during their teen years only to return later as they begin to establish families. As a result, an understanding of our Presbyterian heritage and the tenets/themes of our Reformed faith is not part of the background or memory of most of our members.

As people make a commitment to the ministry of teaching adults, they often come to the task with a sense of call, a love of learning, a desire to pass along the stories of our faith, and an earnest hope to make a difference in the lives of others. However, many are unaware that being Reformed implies particular viewpoints regarding the ways that we teach the adults with whom we work. To that end, we look to the major tenets of our faith tradition to consider how they inform our teaching.

We begin with a presupposition held by all Christians which is foundational to our teaching:  
**Jesus Christ is God Incarnate and the head of the Church. Therefore:**

- Our goal for Christian education is to know, love and follow Jesus Christ.
- Our responsibility as teachers of adults is
  - to encourage their *knowing* of Jesus Christ through Bible study and discussion of faith and life issues;
  - to nurture their *loving* of Jesus Christ by loving them as Christ has loved us;
  - and to encourage *following* Jesus Christ through acts of discipleship and by modeling our own commitment as disciples.

Another presupposition held by all Christians which is foundational to our teaching is the Doctrine of the Trinity: **God is known to us in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Therefore:**

- Our belief in a Triune God prompts us to use language that reflects the three-fold nature of God in our teaching and in our prayers.

## Tenets/Themes of the Reformed Tradition:

### **Sovereignty of God**

**(e.g., God is the Creator of all things, is in control of the universe and is absolutely independent of any other power or will.) Therefore:**

- Teachers/facilitators know that it is God, *not we*, who gives individuals the gift of faith. We can provide an atmosphere, though, in which the nurturing of faith can take place.
- We teach that God continues to be active in our world and we are called to respond to God's activity. Worship and prayer are among the ways we respond to God.
- We teach that God is *for* us, does not give up on us, and desires the best for all of God's creation.
- We treat each individual in the group in a way that reflects our awareness that every person is a unique part of God's creation and thus has worth and value.

- We recognize that though we believe that ultimately God's will triumphs in the end, it might not appear that way in daily life. Therefore, the complexities of life should not be dealt with simplistically. We acknowledge the ambiguities of faith and life.

### **Authority of Scripture**

**(e.g., The Bible is the inspired Word of God and is the final authority for salvation and the life of faith.) Therefore:**

- As people of the Book, we are called to be informed, thinking Christians, which requires an educated faith.
- We recognize that all of us, teachers/leaders and students, are life-long learners who are formed and re-formed by scripture as we allow the Holy Spirit to speak to us in new ways.
- Our lesson plans need to be grounded in careful biblical scholarship from a variety of Reformed sources with thoughtful attention to the original context of the passage.
- Our lessons need to be scripturally based, but also need to include connections with everyday life in order to reinforce the relevance of God's Word for our lives today.
- We recognize the value of Old Testament passages as well as New Testament passages as a source for faith and life.
- As Presbyterians, we do *not* claim that the scriptures are infallible or inerrant. Rather, we believe the scriptures are inspired by God, written by humans, and are our guide for faith and life.
- We use curriculum that is faithful to scripture and the Reformed tradition as our primary source and guide for teaching the biblical stories.
- If we are teaching from a source that is not Reformed, we have a responsibility to bring to the attention of the class the issues/thoughts that reflect a different point of view, and to suggest a more Reformed way of understanding that issue/thought.
- A healthy class discussion can come about when the teacher intentionally places Reformed theology in conversation with other theological understandings, and then clarifies the differences. This acknowledges the complexities that have developed through the centuries from the biblical, theological, and historical witness, yet points to the particular tradition to which we hold. (For example: If the topic is Election, the leader can present a variety of theological positions, past and present: predestination, double predestination, Pelagianism, and universalism. Then a current Reformed understanding can be offered.)

### **Justification by grace through faith**

**(e.g., There is absolutely nothing we can do to earn God's love. God chose us before we chose God.) Therefore:**

- Teachers/facilitators are to demonstrate God's love to all participants, especially to those who are difficult to love.
- We do not hold the expectation that all of us must respond to God's love in the same way.
- Because God's grace is a gift and God's ways are a mystery, we cannot claim to have exclusive knowledge of God's will.

## **God's election**

**(e.g., God chooses/calls us to be God's own. Being chosen/ elected carries with it not only privilege but responsibility.) Therefore:**

- Teachers/facilitators have a responsibility to share the Good News and to teach matters of faith in an atmosphere of love and acceptance.
- Since salvation is God's doing, not ours, we must be careful not to pass judgment on others or draw conclusions about the status of their relationship with God. We are charged by our Lord to love one another.
- God's call to us to be God's own involves more than an acknowledgement of that call. It requires living daily into God's ways and God's love.
- Our teaching does not insist that all believe as we do, but recognizes that God brought each of us to this place and time, and that all of us are on a faith journey. We are in different places on that journey.

## **God's call to service and stewardship**

**(e.g., The Christian life is marked by the responsibility to serve others, to respond to the needs of all of God's creation, and to share our time, talents and treasures.)**

**Therefore:**

- Our focus is on serving Christ as individuals within the community of faith.
- A commitment to teach in the Church School comes from a sense of call which is from God and is confirmed by the church.
- We encourage the identification of an individual's gifts so they might be used for the common good of the community.
- We offer opportunities for people to share their time, talents and treasures.
- We emphasize the importance of our responsibility to God's creation and involvement in the community, and offer opportunities for service.
- We embrace the notion that all of life is from God, so every area of life should be our concern, both within our congregations and beyond...to our communities and the world.
- We offer classes on a variety of topics to broaden our thinking: Bible study, current events, daily living, spirituality and theology, among others.
- We stress over and over that Christianity is not just a belief, but a way of life.

## **Covenant community**

**(e.g., God created us to be in relationship with God and with others. The Church is a strong example of a community of faith where we are to know, love and follow Christ.)**

**Therefore:**

- Teachers/facilitators need to learn the names of those in our class.
- We establish an atmosphere of acceptance and safety, where feelings, struggles, doubts, and questions can be shared without threat of embarrassment or failure.
- We encourage an atmosphere of mutual respect and regard among the members of the class, trying to make sure that each participant is listened to and that no questions are ignored.

- It is more important to deal with the participants' questions, concerns and personalities than to cover the lesson.
- Because many adults feel that fellowship in a class setting is of equal importance to content, hospitality within the classroom and beyond is imperative.
- Small group ministry is one way to meet adult fellowship and learning needs outside the Sunday morning time frame.
- Our faith journey is both personal (not private) and corporate, so both aspects need to be nurtured.
- It is in the discussion and wrestling together over conflicts between faith and daily life that the meaning and significance of God's ways in the world are clarified for us.

### **Priesthood of all believers**

**(e.g., The Holy Spirit speaks to each individual, regardless of age or stage of faith.)**

#### **Therefore:**

- Teachers/facilitators recognize that adults are in different places in their faith journey. We can challenge them to reflect on a new theological concept, but should avoid appearing as *the* authority or as a threat to their long-held beliefs, both of which could be road blocks to learning.
- None of us has a monopoly on understanding God's Word. We must listen to each other to enrich our own understanding.
- We accept the differences in our biblical understandings among us, respect those differences, and try to grow in appreciation of those differences.
- We offer leadership training opportunities for teachers of adults to expose them to a variety of teaching methods (ex: how to ask relevant, open-ended questions to promote discussion) and to the latest research in adult education (ex: brain research and how we learn; multiple intelligences).
- We implement a variety of teaching methods and activities to encourage faith development, recognizing that adults have multiple ways of learning.
- We encourage the participants to take ownership in the class by engaging them in the process of selecting study topics for the group.
- We realize that class members themselves are a valuable resource as the Holy Spirit nudges their thinking.
- We invite the sharing of one another's faith stories not only for inspiration, but to raise awareness and appreciation for the variety of ways that God works among us.
- We lead by example in rejoicing in our differences as we learn from each other.

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