

Frequently Asked Questions

about the UNITED REFORMED CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA

CHOOSING A RELIGION

How do I choose a religion?

Choose it on the basis of truth.

Christians believe that there is one true God Who has revealed Himself only in the person and work of Jesus Christ, as the Bible teaches. If Jesus Christ is the only way to know the one true God, then it follows that Christianity is true and all other religions are false.

But aren't all religions the same?

Yes, with one exception: Christianity.

The vast majority of religions say that good people go to heaven and bad to hell, so try your best, be better than the person next to you, and you will be fine. Christianity says the exact opposite.

The Bible teaches that all people are born as sinners. That means all people naturally break God's Law, which requires perfect

love for God and neighbor. Because God is perfectly holy and just, He will punish sinful people. The Bible therefore teaches that no one deserves to go to heaven; everyone deserves to go to hell.

The Bible also teaches that God has overcome sin and hell through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus obeyed all of God's Law; He loved God and neighbor perfectly. After living a perfect life, Jesus willingly died on the cross, taking on the eternal anger of God for His sinful people. After dying, He was buried and raised on the third day.

When you have faith that Jesus obeyed God's Law and died in your place, God credits your sin to Jesus and credits Jesus' righteous deeds to you. Through true faith in Jesus,

you are forgiven your sins and considered *perfectly righteous* in God's eyes, and will live with God in eternity.

Some churches claiming to be Christian have said, and continue to say, the same as other religions. The medieval Roman Catholic church's beliefs were summarized in the phrase "to those who do what is in them, God does not deny grace." In other words, "do your best and God does the rest."

This, however, is contrary to the Bible, which says *you can do nothing to save yourself* apart from what God has already done for you. He has transferred the penalty for your sin to Christ on the cross, while crediting you with the benefits of His perfect life and His resurrection.

CHOOSING A CHURCH

Do I need to join a church?

God commands His people to gather in His church. There, He nourishes them with preaching, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the care of the elders, ministers and deacons. Your membership in a particular local church also signifies your agreement with the confessional standards of that church. According to the Bible, true belief always shows itself in church membership: those who believe become members of true churches that honor the Bible.

How do I choose a church?

The first question is *what is a church?* All sorts of groups claim to be Christian churches: Mormons, Roman Catholics, Baptists, the community church on the corner, etc. How do you distinguish a true church from a false church (or a "sect")?

The Bible explains that true churches have three marks, or defining characteristics:

1. They preach the true Gospel.
2. They administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper according to Bible.
3. They lovingly discipline their members when members neglect, or attempt to corrupt, either of the first two marks.

Churches either hit these marks or they don't. It's not a sliding scale. All churches are weak and have their share of problems, but *some churches are true and some are not* — that's the important difference. You know Christ meets you at a true church's worship service.

The best way to evaluate whether a group is a true church is to read their written confessions, like our Three Forms of Unity (available at start.urclearning.org/what-we-believe). Study various groups' confessions and see which ones most closely match biblical teaching.

What are Reformed Churches? What was the Protestant Reformation?

Since the Bible teaches that Christians continue to sin, we know that the church will be corrupted over time. Therefore, Christians should always attempt to reform the church, to put it back in accordance with biblical teachings and practice.

During the sixteenth century, Roman Catholics chose to stop participating in this process and actually condemned those who attempted such reform. Reformers were forced out of the Roman Catholic church and participated in the Reformation in Protestant churches such as the Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed churches.

From 1618 to 1619, the Reformed churches from dozens of countries throughout the world sent representatives to meet at the Synod, or Council, of Dordrecht, Netherlands. There, they collectively stated their faith and summarized biblical teachings with three →

documents, or “forms”, of unity, which were received as the official written confessions of the church: the Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, and Canons of Dort.

What is the URC?

The United Reformed Churches in North America is a Reformed federation (some-what like a denomination) of churches. We are descendant churches of the Protestant Reformation. There are currently about 100 congregations in the federation, with a total of over 20,000 members spread across the United States and Canada. (We are not affiliated with the United Reformed Churches in the United Kingdom.)

What do URC churches believe?

The United Reformed Churches in North America hold to the Three Forms of Unity developed by the early Reformed churches. Again, these Three Forms are:

- *The Heidelberg Catechism*, which is written in a simple question-and-answer format that helps explain biblical teaching to children and those new to the faith;

- *The Belgic Confession*, which explains various biblical teachings;
- *The Canons of Dort*, which is a series of responses to specific theological issues.

These written confessions faithfully summarize the teaching of the Bible, which focus on the person and work of Jesus Christ. To read the full texts, visit start.urclearning.org/stated-faith.

Why are statements of faith important?

Statements of faith (written confessions) are not the ultimate authority in churches; the Bible is the ultimate authority. Nevertheless, the Church has always stated its faith in written confessions, and for good reason. For example, The Three Forms of Unity (our statements of faith), perform many roles:

- *They summarize biblical teachings*, such as the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, predestination, justification, and the Church.
- *They allow members to gather together around shared beliefs about fundamental teachings in the Bible*, and thereby relegate non-essential issues (like political and cultural issues) to

personal opinion, lest the church split needlessly.

- *They help others understand what we believe*, which allows us to seek unity with other like-minded churches, and other churches to seek unity with us.

What if a church doesn't hold to its confessions?

Some groups have confessions but no longer subscribe to them — they retain them for their historical value as relics of what they once believed; other groups either have no confessions or they have broad “statements” that fail to specify what they believe about the issues of great importance in the Bible. Neither practice is helpful in making a decision. Don't join groups who refuse to state what they currently believe, or who do so in a vague and loose way that passes over crucial biblical teachings.

URC churches use the Three Forms of Unity to help us stay true to God's Word. They keep ministers accountable to teach the Bible accurately, and keep members accountable to follow the Bible faithfully.

TAKING ACTION

How can I find a URC church?

For a directory of URC churches and plants, please visit covenant-urc.org/urcna/directory.asp. Contact any church and we'll be happy to speak further with you.

What if I'm not near a URC church?

We know better than to assume that there are true churches in most places, and we're working to rectify the problem. But what are you supposed to do when there is simply no true church around?

- *Contact us and we'll try to help you find one.* Email us at info@start.urclearning.org and we'll see if we can help you find one. If we can't, we'll put you in our database, which we are developing as a strategic church-planting planning tool.
- *Consider attending a confessional Lutheran or*

Presbyterian church temporarily.

Some places that don't meet the criteria will be better for you than others, but only temporarily. Maybe a confessional Lutheran congregation or a confessional Presbyterian congregation would work for a time. (Although they have important differences from our confessional continental Reformed churches, some of these churches may bear the three marks.) Get in touch with us and we'll help you look and discern.

- *Form a study or church-plant group.* If you know of people in your area who want to learn more, and who may be interested in forming a group for further study, discussion, or church-planting, let us know. Maybe the Lord will call you to get pastoral training and lead the group. Introduce us to your group; we might be able to visit you, or even send a

church planter to you. No group yet? Invite others to the start.urclearning.org website to start learning more together, and see if a group develops.

How can I learn more?

Visit our website, start.urclearning.org, and listen to biblical, Christ-centered sermons and our theological talk show, “Sinners and Saints.” Use the lessons posted there.

What can I do to help?

We need your help! Please email us at info@start.urclearning.org if:

- you have a non-English translation of the Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, or Canons of Dort, or could translate them
- you can record an audio translation of a document or one of the posted recordings
- you can help in some other way.

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