

OUR CONFSSIONAL FOUNDATIONS IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

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Introduction

Second only to the Bible, the foundational witness to Jesus Christ in our denomination is the *Book of Confessions*. It is Part I of our Constitution, but it is often far less well known than the second part, our *Book of Order*. Our *Book of Confessions* is clearly our greatest constitutional treasure and is a wonderful source of wisdom and inspiration for our faith in Christ, who has led our church through the ages and who leads it today.

One of the identifying marks of Presbyterian and Reformed Christians is our use of confessions to state the foundational commitments of our faith to the world in which we live. In a time of religious crisis John Knox and five colleagues drafted the Scots Confession in 1560 to state what they clearly believed. Reformed communities in the Netherlands, Germany, and Hungary drew strength from the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563, as the Swiss did from the Second Helvetic Confession in 1566.

What is somewhat unique to the Presbyterian Church (USA) is that we do not have a single confession of faith, but rather we have a book of confessions. Each one was written in a particular age to express the eternal faith of the church in a particular context. In the period of the early church the Nicene and Apostle's Creed were written to make clear the faith of the church in pagan world. In the Reformation era six confessions and catechisms were written which have been included in our *Book of Confessions* to make clear the witness to the gospel of Reformed Christians in the era of the Reformation. In the twentieth century three confessions have been added: The Barmen Declaration affirming the Lordship of Christ over against the claims of the Nazis, the Confession of 67 calling the church to a ministry of reconciliation in the turbulent 60s and 70s, and the Brief Statement of Faith affirming the faith of the reunited Presbyterian Church in beautiful and poetic language.

What is important about our *Book of Confessions* is not every specific article, admonition or prohibition. Hopefully, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we have learned new things about our obedience to Christ over the years! What is important are the common themes that express the central verities of the Christian faith in all the different contexts in which the church lives, and moves and has its being. This is what we today call the "essential tenets of the Reformed faith."

This broad, rather than narrow, way of understanding our confessions is not new to Presbyterians. In the Adopting Act of 1729 our General Assembly made it clear that officers were not held to a "fundamentalist" understanding of the confession (then only one, the Westminster Confession and catechisms) but to an upholding of its "essential and necessary articles." Adopting a *Book of Confessions*, as our church did in the late 1960s, is itself an invitation to theological diversity and dialogue in the best spirit of the Presbyterian tradition. It is also a wonderful way to enable Christians in their diversity to discover the common themes such as the incarnation, the trinity, justification by grace through faith, and the like that ring true throughout the confessions and throughout Christian experience in every age.

I invite you to join me in a serious study of our *Book of Confessions*. A particularly good resource for this is the Study Edition of the *Book of Confessions* which can be ordered through Presbyterian Distribution Services. I want to highlight for you each particular part of our confessional heritage, to outline the challenges facing the church to which it sought to respond, and to suggest some of the great affirmations of the Christian faith which it lifted up in its time and for our own. I invite you to join me in discovering again the rich insights of our confessions so that each of us and our church will be able to more faithfully confess the faith “once given to the saints” in our own contemporary world.

The Nicene Creed

The first Creed adopted by representatives of the entire church was the Nicene Creed, and it is still the most widely affirmed confession of faith among all three major branches of the Christian Church: Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox. Like some other Creeds in our Book of Confessions (such as The Declaration of Barmen in Germany in 1934) the Nicene Creed was adopted during political, as well as religious, controversy. As the only Creed known and used by the majority of Christians world-wide, the Nicene Creed has represented a consensus of what the church believes.

Constantine the Great desired to consolidate his vast empire through unifying a variety of somewhat different Christian beliefs used at baptisms, so he called a Council of over 300 bishops in 325 A.D. to meet in Nicea (about 50 miles southeast of modern Istanbul). Much of the work on formulating the Nicene Creed was accomplished in Nicea, but the section on the Holy Spirit was added in a similar Council in 381 in Constantinople.

The basic uncertainty for the early church was over the nature and person of Jesus Christ. Was Jesus just human or was he also God, and was Jesus the God of the Christians, and a different God from the God of Israel? The debates were a long time ago, but the yearning question about who is Jesus Christ is the central question for every Christian today. The Council of Nicea made it clear to all the world that Jesus Christ is both “the only Son of God” and “truly human.” The foundation stone of our faith - and the faith of the whole Church - is that Jesus Christ is God incarnate.

There was one crucial matter in the Nicene Creed - the doctrine of the Holy Spirit - that was not resolved until 55 years had passed and a second Council met at Constantinople (now Istanbul). With its affirmation that the Holy Spirit is “the Lord, the giver of life” the Nicene Creed gave formal declaration to what we know today as the doctrine of the Trinity. The Nicene Creed gives powerful witness to the great truth that God created the world, redeemed it in Jesus Christ, and renews it through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit - three expressions of our one God. Thus, the doctrine of One God in Three persons has been taught ever since.

One phrase in this latter section of the Nicene Creed that I have always treasured is its statement about the Church, “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.” In an age of rampant individualism and party spirit in the Church, it is important to be reminded anew of these great truths:

- that the Church is one - Faithful Christians are always ecumenical!
- that the Church is holy - It is God’s church, not ours!
- that the Church is catholic - The Christian community welcomes the broadest diversity of the human family!
- that the Church is apostolic - It exists not for itself, but to share God’s justice, love and mercy with all the world!

The Nicene Creed was written to give a sense of grounding and direction to Christian people faced with

the turmoil of the fourth century world. Sixteen centuries later its message provides that same sense of grounding and direction in the things that truly matter for Christians at the dawn of the third millennium.

The Apostles' Creed

As I travel across the church, I am pleased at how many congregations I see using the Apostles Creed, and at the large number of worshipers who have it memorized.

Although the beliefs listed in the Creed were surely accepted by the earliest followers of Jesus, and the statements about God the creator Father, the Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit were stated in various ways at baptisms for centuries, the Creed as we have it did not become "official" in its present form until the reign of the Emperor Charlemagne in 814. The great Presbyterian missionary statesman of the last century, Robert E. Speer, called this Creed the most succinct statement of the Christian faith.

Even in language that is different from our current usage, there are just a few terms that are not quickly grasped by new Christians. The first is "Ghost," which in common use has been replaced by "Spirit," the many actions of God in creation, the church, and in the lives of Christians. The strange thing is that although virtually all Christians believe that God is alive through the Holy Spirit, and leads us and guides us, many of us are reluctant to accept the reality that God points us today in new directions with different understandings from the past.

Not always understood, and even rejected by some steadfast Christians, is the phrase "descended into hell." This phrase states the conviction that Jesus, being fully human, truly died after His crucifixion and entered into the death of all other persons. "Hell" here is not understood as the location of evil persons, but as the place of the dead. An early view was that Christ liberated those who had died, while others also believed that He conquered the realm of Satan, a victory over death and evil.

"Quick" in the second paragraph means "living" and in the final paragraph "catholic" means "universal," with reference to the unity of the whole church and not just the Roman Catholic Church.

In summary this Creed in just three paragraphs is very strong, stating the importance of one God who is creator with power and might.

The central paragraph about Jesus the redeeming Christ states the major magnificent themes that the church has historically accepted and believed about Christ: the conception of the Virgin Mary by an act of God's Spirit; the trial and suffering under a Roman ruler; the crucifixion; death and burial; the triumphal resurrection; Christ's return beside God the Father; and the coming judgment. It is not possible for the church to underestimate the importance of these affirmations.

The final section on the reality of the Holy Spirit emphasizes the worldwide or ecumenical community of all believers; the fellowship of Christ's followers, not just for the present age, but for those saints who have died, as well as those yet to come. Jesus' death was not for nothing, but was an atonement for the forgiveness of sins. As stressed in I Corinthians, the Christian's resurrection flows directly from the resurrection of Christ in bodily form as witnessed by many followers after His death and resurrection. John's gospel emphasizes that eternal life is a quality of life which begins at the time God enters into a person's life - and continues.

For a creed so dear to so many Christians, it appropriately ends with the simple word, "Amen" (so be it). These are the great truths of the Christian faith, to which we should all give a loud "Amen!"

The Reformation Era Confessions

Our Book of Confessions leaps from the formation of early creeds, or statements of belief in the early centuries of the Christian faith, to the Confessions written following the Protestant Reformation. In one decade came the Scots Confession (1560), which virtually made Scotland Presbyterian; the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) of Germany; and the Second Helvetic Confession of Switzerland (1566); to be followed by the Westminster Confession of Faith and its two catechisms (1647) in England.

These strong and vigorous documents must be seen against the background of the medieval Roman Catholic Church. Jesus Christ is the heart of the gospel and the center of the Christian faith, but Jesus had, in effect, been replaced by priest and pope. They stated what they believed in distinction from much Roman Catholic teaching and practice at that time with the watchwords of the Reformation: grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone.

The initial ringing emphasis for the Reformers was the doctrine of grace alone, an issue that still sometimes negatively sneaks up on us when we fall into the pattern of assuming that our "good works" will somehow assure our salvation. Our stated belief is that it is in God's loving mercy for us, as fully revealed in Jesus Christ, that we are redeemed, but we frequently act as if it is essential that we accomplish every task perfectly if we are going to be saved. (Workaholics often live as if God's grace is insufficient.) The Reformers insisted that neither following church rules or practices nor church leaders was ultimately essential. What counts is not what persons do, but what God has done. The Second Helvetic Confession calls the Lord's Supper "a memorial of God's benefits."

Again, in contrast to the medieval teaching that such things as the selling of indulgences are necessary for salvation, the Reformers endorsed faith alone "...whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls..." (Westminster). "...this faith is a pure gift of God which God alone of his grace gives..." (Second Helvetic) It should be clearly noted, however, that these Reformers believed that the election of God would not be of all persons. For example, a question in Heidelberg is, "Will all men (sic), then, be saved through Christ...?" and the answer is "No. Only those who, by true faith, are incorporated into him and accept all his benefits." At the same time, there was great care not to deny the sovereignty of God in saving humanity. We read in the Second Helvetic: "...we believe there is no *certain* salvation outside Christ," (italics added) and "For we know that God had some friends outside the commonwealth of Israel."

Another vital and vigorous conviction throughout these creeds is a firm belief in Scripture alone. Heidelberg and Westminster, in fact, begin with their statements about Scripture. Once more, this issue is highlighted, in part, against the backdrop of the then Roman Church's lack of emphasis on the Bible, while giving prominence to tradition, veneration of saints and images, what seemed to be superstition to the Reformers. The Second Helvetic puts it this way: "So we teach that the true harmony of the church consists in doctrines and in the true and harmonious preaching of the Gospel of Christ, and in rites that have been expressly delivered by the Lord." "...Holy Scripture (is) most necessary (because)...the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence...are...not sufficient to give that knowledge of God... which is necessary unto salvation..." (Westminster)

These ardent defenses of the faith have two remarkable and memorable statements. "Man's (sic) chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." (Westminster Shorter Catechism). "Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death? A. That I belong - body and soul, in life and in death - not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ." (Heidelberg Catechism) Great truths of the Christian faith - in the 16th

century and in the 21st!

The Theological Declaration of Barmen

Sometimes it is spine-tingling to reflect upon the courage of stalwart Christians in times of intense struggles to proclaim Christ as Lord. Upon becoming Chancellor of Germany in early 1933, Adolf Hitler initially promised to respect the rights and agreements between the churches and the government, and most Catholics and Protestants saw great hope for the future in Hitler's National Socialism, but within weeks many civil rights were abolished. Hitler patronized the so-called "German Christians" who were anti-communist, anti-Jew, anti-Mason and anti-internationalist while supporting racial purity; those Christians accepted the Nazi law which excluded from the church all persons with Jewish ancestry.

But the revolutionary character of the good news does not permit acceptance of just what occurs. By September of that year Martin Niemöller, a Lutheran pastor in Berlin, called for a meeting of a Pastors' Emergency League: "We have formed an 'Emergency League' of ministers who have given written assurance to one another that in their preaching they will be bound only by Holy Scripture and the Confessions of the Reformation and to the best of their ability will succor those brethren (sic) who in doing so have to suffer."

In January, 1934, the Nazi government forbade any public criticism of the puppet "German Christians" or any discussion of church controversy. But in April the Pastors' Emergency League appointed a committee of three to make theological preparation for the First Confessing Synod of the Evangelical Church, to be held May 29-31, 1934, in Barmen in northern Germany. One of the three, Karl Barth, did most of the drafting of what became, with some changes by the Synod, "The Theological Declaration of Barmen."

This Confession is quite short with the first part being An Appeal to the Evangelical Congregations and Christians in Germany. This section reported that "...representatives (there were 139) from all the German Confessional Churches met with one accord in a confession of the one Lord of the one, holy, apostolic Church. In fidelity to their Confession of Faith, members of Lutheran, Reformed and United Churches sought a common message for the need and temptation of the Church in our day." They called for prayer and urged congregations to gather around those pastors and teachers who were loyal to the Confessions, and not to a national civil religion under Hitler.

They gave gratitude to God that, led by the Holy Spirit, they had a common message to share. They took pains to dispel the rumor that they were opposed to the unity of the German nation, and to disavow those who sought to pervert their intentions! They exclaimed, "Try the spirits whether they are of God." (Why is it that there always seem to be some who wish to distort the message of gatherings of Christians?)

Part II is composed of a twenty-three paragraph Theological Doctrine Concerning the Present Situation of the German Evangelical Church, and it was a bold and daring explanation, which proved also to be dangerous for those who participated. Article I of the Constitution of this newly united German Evangelical Church, which had been approved the previous year by the Reich Government, was repeated: "The inviolable foundation of the German Evangelical Church is the gospel of Jesus Christ as it is attested for us in Holy Scripture and brought to light again in the Confessions of the Reformation."

The Synod went on to report that the unity of the German Evangelical Church, "... is threatened by the teaching methods and actions of the ruling Church party of the 'German Christians.' and carried on by them." The main section of the Declaration states six evangelical truths, each of which begins with a

biblical quotation, followed by a statement, which is in turn succeeded by a "false doctrine" that the portion of Scripture and the statement forcefully reject.

"Jesus Christ is God's assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins...he is also God's mighty claim upon our whole life." This meant that human rights, social justice and political astuteness are a part of the "whole life" of the Christian just as the worship of God is. " As the church of pardoned sinners, it has to testify...with its faith and with its obedience."

After quoting I Peter 2:17, "Fear God. Honor the emperor," in a daring statement directed at the "German Christians" and the government, the Synod stated, "We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church, over and beyond its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the State, thus itself becoming an organ of the State."

Finally, the Synod "Entreats all whom it concerns to return to the unity of faith, love, and hope." It also makes a powerful affirmation that the church in all of its action is to "speak the truth in love."

Albert Einstein's often quoted remark was, "Only the church stood across the path of Hitler's campaign for suppressing the truth....I am forced to confess that what I once despised, I now praise unreservedly." Einstein saw well the power of the gospel in Jesus Christ to enable the church to stand against the forces of oppression in his time. May we once again reclaim this confession, not to promote one "side" over another in our church, but as a rallying cry for the Church of Jesus Christ to be a stalwart in the cause of God's justice in our time!

Twentieth Century American Confessions

In contrast to the other creeds in The Book of Confessions, many still living remember vividly the crafting of "The Confession of 1967" and "The Brief Statement of Faith" of 1991.

From the Adopting Act of 1729, the confessional statement of American Presbyterianism had been the Westminster Standards (The Confession of Faith, the Larger Catechism, and the Shorter Catechism). But by the time of union of 1958 between the United Presbyterian Church of North America and the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the Westminster Confession had been amended in 1903 (to express the love of God for all people) and in 1950 (to permit the re-marriage of divorced persons), so it was decided to appoint a "Special Committee on a Brief Contemporary Statement of Faith."

The Special Committee, with some slight revisions by a second Committee of Fifteen, offered the Church the Book of Confessions (minus the Westminster Larger Catechism and, of course, the 1991 Brief Statement of Faith), and presented a new creed that was named after the year in which it was adopted, the Confession of 1967. C-67, as it is informally called, was not meant to be a Creed for all time, but for its time, based on II Corinthians 5:19, "...in Jesus Christ God was reconciling the world to himself."

The three Parts are God's Work of Reconciliation; The Ministry of Reconciliation; and The Fulfillment of Reconciliation. The two most debated parts of this Confession were around the fact that Jesus Christ was placed first as the living, redeeming and reconciling Word of God in contrast to the fact that the Creed then in place, namely, Westminster, begins in Chapter I with a consideration of Holy Scripture. The charge was made against the writers of C-67 that they were de-emphasizing the Bible. The church today readily accepts placing Christ first.

The second primary point of discussion concerned what is now numbered paragraph 9.45, which says in

part, "...The church, in its own life, is called to practice the forgiveness of enemies and to commend to the nations as practical politics the search for cooperation and peace. This search requires that the nations pursue fresh and responsible relations across every line of conflict, *even at risk to national security*,..." (italics added) Particularly at a time when there is a surge in patriotism, Presbyterians do well to underscore their conviction that one's first loyalty is to God in Jesus Christ, and not to any nation. Reconciliation is often difficult and risky at any level, but this magnificent Confession stresses the fact that as Christ has reconciled us to God so we are to be agents of reconciliation in every situation.

Article 3 in The Articles of Agreement at the time of the 1983 reunion of the Presbyterian Church in the United States and the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America called for the appointment of "...a committee representing diversities of points of view and of groups within the reunited church to prepare a Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith..." Some wondered if a committee of such diversity could ever prepare a Brief Statement (as many have doubted that a diverse Task Force appointed in 2001 can help a divided church), but the committee wrote an innovative and well received document which was approved in 1991.

The Statement begins with a ringing reminiscence of the first question in the Heidelberg Catechism, "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?" and its profound response. The main section of "The Brief Statement" is like The Apostles' Creed in being trinitarian in formulation, but reversing the order of the first two persons of the Godhead so that the Statement begins with Jesus Christ, who is, of course, the strong and emphatic emphasis of the Apostles' Creed.. Fresh language in a creed is the striking sentence about Jesus, who was "Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition..."

The paragraph about God concludes with beautiful and inclusive language,
"Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still."

There is a strong affirmation on the role of the Holy Spirit, and in addition to more traditional expressions, it also has a defining descriptive line,
"In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage ...
To unmask idolatries in church and culture. "

Designed to be used, also, in public worship, the Statement takes about 5 minutes to be read aloud in unison so it often read in sections only; in any event, it is a tremendous document for both personal and corporate regular study, worship and reflection.

Conclusion

Throughout all of these confessions are common affirmations that define the shared faith of the Church, and which I believe are shared by the vast majority of Presbyterians. Chapter Two of the *Form of Government* was drafted at reunion to be an aid to our governing bodies in examining candidates concerning the essential tenets of the Reformed faith, and it does an excellent job of highlighting the major themes of our common faith as Presbyterians:

- the mystery of the triune God
- the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ
- salvation by grace alone

- salvation by faith alone
- the authority of scripture
- the sovereignty of God
- election for service as well as salvation
- covenant life together in the church
- faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation
- seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God

These are the core theological convictions that unite Presbyterians. We need to affirm this confessional tradition and continually reappropriate it for our time. The biggest problem with our *Book of Confessions* is that it is so little known and studied in the PCUSA. While the *Book of Order* may be our “best seller,” the *Book of Confessions* surely is not. Without a shared faith in Jesus Christ, no polity can renew the church. One of our first priorities for the renewal of our church as a New Testament Church in a New Century would be a reclaiming of our *Book of Confessions* as the first and most important book in our Constitution.