

THE CHURCH AND ITS CONFESSIONS

Purpose of Confessional Statements

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) states its faith and bears witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ in the creeds and confessions in the Book of Confessions. In these confessional statements the Church declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do.

These statements identify the Church as a community of people known by its convictions as well as by its actions. They guide the Church in its study and interpretation of the Scriptures; they summarize the essence of Christian tradition; they direct the Church in maintaining sound doctrines: they equip the Church for its work of proclamation,

These confessional statements are subordinate standards in the Church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him. While confessional standards are subordinate to the Scriptures, they are, nonetheless, standards. They are not lightly drawn up or subscribed to, nor may they be ignored or dismissed. The Church is prepared to counsel with or even to discipline one ordained who seriously rejects the faith expressed in the confessions.

Faith of the Church Catholic Proclaimed

In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) gives witness to the faith of the Church catholic. The confessions express the faith of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church in the recognition of canonical Scriptures and the formulation and adoption of the ecumenical creeds, notably the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds with their definitions of the mystery of the triune God and of the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ.

In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) identifies with the affirmations of the Protestant Reformation. The focus of these affirmations is the rediscovery of God's grace in Jesus Christ as revealed in the Scriptures. The Protestant watchwords – grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone – embody principles of understanding which continue to guide and motivate the people of God in the life of faith.

In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) expresses the faith of the Reformed tradition. Central to this tradition is the affirmation of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love. Related to this central affirmation of God's sovereignty are other great themes of the Reformed tradition:

1. The election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation;
2. Covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the Church according to the word of God;
3. A faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God's creation;
4. The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God.

Thus, the creeds and confessions of this Church reflect a particular stance within the history of God's people. They are the result of prayer; thought, and experience within a living tradition. They serve to strengthen personal commitment and the life and witness of the community of believers.

[The preceding paragraphs are from the Form of Government of the Book of Order, G-2.0100 - 2.0500.]

EARLY CHURCH CREEDS

The Nicene Creed

Our word “creed” comes from the Latin *credo*, which means “I believe.” In essence, statements like the Nicene Creed became known as creeds because of they proclaim what it is that the Church believes.

The Nicene Creed grew out of the Council of Nicaea in 325. The Emperor Constantine had called this council to deal with a false teaching called Arianism. Arius, an elder in the church at Alexandria, questioned the eternal nature of Jesus Christ, contending that he had a beginning at some point in time, being “begotten” by the Father.

Arius' teachings forced the church to be specific about what it believed concerning Jesus, thus, the very extensive second paragraph proclaiming the eternal existence and unity of the Son of God and the Father (“one substance”). Although the groundwork of the Nicene Creed was laid by this council, the actual creed as we know it was refined during the succeeding years.

The Nicene Creed presents the following themes:

1. **Christ is central.** – The largest section of the creed deals with issues about Jesus that were in dispute.
2. **Trinity.** The doctrine of the Trinity received its first official defense in this Creed.

The Apostles' Creed

The precise date of the formulation of this creed is not known, although some scholars locate it in the fifth century after Christ, later than the Nicene Creed. One tradition stated that each of the twelve apostles contributed an article to the creed; in reality the creed attempts to make a brief statement as to what was the faith that the church has received from the apostles.

It is believed that the Apostles Creed was developed as a kind of confession called a *symbolum*. This statement was not intended to be a complete summary of Christian doctrine, but rather a brief statement of the essential teachings of the faith. Primarily used for preparation for baptism within the early church, the *symbolum* was memorized and repeated to the bishop upon examination. Since the creed was passed along orally, few early written versions have survived.

The Apostles Creed is well known in American churches, though it is less widely used among all branches of the church around the world. The Apostles Creed presents the same themes as the Nicene Creed.

REFORMATION-ERA CREEDS

The Scots Confession

The first of the Reformation-era confessions in the Presbyterian Church *Book of Confessions* is the Scots Confession. Written in 1560, the Scots Confession was the defining document for the Church of Scotland, which was Presbyterian in theology and government, as opposed to the Anglican Church of England (and the Roman Catholic conflicts which embroiled both states.)

The following themes are conveyed by the Scots Confession:

1. **The Church.** The Scots Confession contains many strong statements about the Church (which the confession calls “the Kirk”).
2. **Bible and preaching.** Preaching of the Word of God is a strong theme, most likely due to the influence of John Knox, a protégé of John Calvin, whose sharp presentations made him the leader of the Scottish Reformation.
3. **God’s presence.** God’s presence is central, particularly as expressed in God’s call which gives life and shape to the church.

The Heidelberg Catechism

A catechism is a document prepared expressly to instruct people, particularly converts and others preparing for baptism and membership in the Church. These persons were called “catechumens,” derived from the Greek word “to teach.” Most catechisms followed a question and answer format, to convey the basic teachings of the Christian faith.

The Heidelberg Catechism is an example of this form of teaching tool. Prepared in Germany under the orders of Frederick III, the catechism was developed for followers of John Calvin’s teachings. The catechism, finished in 1563, has 129 questions and answers, divided into two or three questions for each of the 52 Lord’s Days (Sundays) in the average year.

The Heidelberg Catechism contains the following themes:

1. **Trinity.** The Catechism contains a long discussion of the Trinity, particularly the role played in the plan of salvation.

2. **God's commandments.** The Ten Commandments appear as a major section of the catechism, after its presentation of the basics of the gospel proclamation. The section on the commandments teaches that obedience is the proper form of thankfulness.
3. **Lord's Prayer.** The Catechism concludes with teaching on prayer, particularly the Lord's Prayer examined petition by petition.

The Second Helvetic Confession

The Heidelberg Catechism was intended to be a teaching tool, but unfortunately, served in some quarters to heighten tensions between different segments of the Church in Reformation times. Frederick III commissioned the Second Helvetic Confession as a position of faith to justify Heidelberg. The Confession was written in 1566 by Heinrich Bullinger, who used as a basis a personal confession he had written five years earlier (presumably, the "first" Helvetic confession).

The confession is rather long, emphasizing Christian experience. Like the Scots Confession, it gives considerable emphasis to the church. In an unswerving yet moderate fashion, the confession spells out what the Swiss church believed, and contradicted the errors of its critics.

The Second Helvetic Confession presents the following themes:

1. **Salvation.** One of the more lengthy parts of this confession is its presentation on salvation.
2. **Our response.** Our response to God's movement towards us is presented as a call to grow in knowledge and discipline.
3. **Ministry.** The pastoral ministry and the church's care for its own members is stressed
4. **Sacraments.** Holy Communion and Baptism, the two sacraments of the New Testament Church, are presented and defended against perceived errors of that time.

The Westminster Standards

The Westminster Standards consist of a confession of faith and two catechisms: the Shorter and Larger. These statements were drafted from 1643-1646 by an assembly of Protestants at Westminster, England, during a period of unrest directed towards Charles I, prior to his overthrow by Oliver Cromwell in 1649. These credal statements have been recognized as standard expressions of the Reformed tradition by Presbyterian and Reformed Churches ever since.

The Westminster Confession opens with a chapter on Holy Scripture, and then develops as major themes the sovereignty of God and God's covenant with humanity. Two thirds of the confession deals with the Christian life, stressing the importance of a life lived in obedience to God's will. The two catechisms both present the basics of the Christian faith, with the Larger Catechism giving more in-depth answers.

The Westminster Standards are considered to be the most "presbyterian" credal statements, and for years were the only statement officially recognized as expressing the historic faith of the denomination. Themes presented include:

1. The authority of the written Word of God, basic to the teachings of the confession and catechisms.
2. The Trinity, and the outworking of salvation.
3. God's providence and control over all life and history.
4. The rule of God., and the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life, with nothing outside of his authority.
5. The Church and its calling in human society.
6. The sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper

TWENTIETH CENTURY CREEDS

Theological Declaration of Barmen

The Theological Declaration of Barmen is the first of three confessional statements in the Book of Confessions from the 20th century. Drafted by the Synod of Barmen of the German Confessional Churches (Lutheran and Reformed) on May 29-31, 1934, the document was a declaration of conscience against the rising power of Adolf Hitler.

In the 1930's, Hitler attempted to consolidate his power over Germany with attempts to make the church subservient to the state. Using six statements from Scripture, the Theological Declaration of Barmen speaks out against six false

doctrines which were felt to be current in the Germany of that day. These six statements are taken from the Nazi-approved church constitution of 1933.

Some who signed the Declaration paid the ultimate price for their convictions, most notably one of its primary drafters, the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (but not Karl Barth). Arrested in 1943 for his participation in the Resistance movement of Germany, Bonhoeffer was executed for treason on April 9, 1945.

Barmen presents the following themes:

1. A protest and witness against Nazi tyranny and any effort to take the role of God and control the church.
2. Suffering and death may follow from defense of the faith against tyranny, but the church is called to serve the Lord, not human authorities.
3. Despite persecution and the crisis of war, the cross (and the Christian faith and church which it symbolizes) survives, rising out of the flames.

The Confession of 1967

The Confession of 1967 takes its name from the year in which the General Assembly of the former United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America gave final approval for its inclusion in the *Book of Confessions*. Written by a special committee in 1965, the confession was edited by another committee in 1966, and approved by the presbyteries in 1967.

The confession grew out of a conviction that the church needed to bear "a present witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ" in the midst of the turbulence of the 1960's. In a decade beset by the Cold War and the nuclear arms race, racial strife, growing dissension about the war in Vietnam, and other social problems, the confession proclaims the reconciliation which Christ has accomplished, and which the church must proclaim.

The confession itself was an occasion for controversy in the denomination. Many attacked segments of the statement as being departures from the historic understandings of the Presbyterian and reformed faith, particularly its view of the authority of the Bible. Several groups formed to oppose these theological trends, including the Presbyterian Lay Committee and Presbyterians United for a Biblical Confession. The latter group eventually became part of what is now known as Presbyterians for Renewal.

Themes which appear in this confession include:

1. **Reconciliation.** The Confession casts its teaching in the rubric of reconciliation, that God was in Christ reconciling the world. The Confession explores how this reconciliation affects what we do as individuals and as a society.
2. **Moral confusion.** The Confession speaks to the moral confusion of the times, and defines a role of the church as speaking the mind of God to the world.

Brief Statement of Faith

The Brief Statement of Faith was approved by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) on June 8, 1991, while meeting in Baltimore, Maryland. Commissioned as a result of the 1983 reunion of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and the Presbyterian Church in the U.S., the Brief Statement is a liturgical expression of the historic Christian faith for contemporary times.

The two denominations which reunited in Atlanta in 1983 had been divided for over 130 years. Not only were there differences over issues surrounding slavery, but in the twentieth century, differences in the distribution of power between the governing bodies of the church.

The Brief Statement is not brief in the sense of the Apostles' or Nicene Creeds, but is in comparison to the Confession of 1967, the most recent Presbyterian confessional statement. The Statement follows the format of the two ancient creeds, with sections on God as Creator and Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and the Holy Spirit as the inspirer of faith in individuals and the Church. Joyfully this confession proclaims "in life and in death, we belong to God."