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CONFESSING OUR FAITH

The *Book of Confessions* for Church Leaders

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CONTENTS

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is designed to give readers maximum flexibility in its use. While I include many key quotations from, and references to, the church's confessions, readers will also benefit by having an up-to-date copy of the *Book of Confessions* close at hand.[1] The book begins with an introduction that describes the responsibilities of church leaders for the *Book of Confessions*. The first chapter proceeds to discuss the meaning of "confession" and to set each of the twelve documents of the *Book of Confessions* into historical and theological context; the next eleven chapters develop some of the confessions' major teachings; and the conclusion challenges church leaders, as grounded in the confessions, to serve as the church's theological and spiritual leaders.

A note about language: Many of the confessions use masculine pronouns for God and humanity (e.g., "men"). When quoting, I have not changed the historic language unless the church has adopted

1. In the text, I refer to particular sections of the confessions by paragraph number (e.g., SC 3.01 for the first article of the Scots Confession). See the *Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2016).

an inclusive language version. While I have sought to use inclusive language as much as possible in my own text, I too occasionally use masculine pronouns for God in order to avoid awkward sentence constructions and to emphasize God's personal character.

The chapters devoted to the confessions' major teachings follow the order of many traditional Reformed confessions: the authority of Scripture, the three persons of the Trinity and the work especially associated with each (for the Father, creation and covenant; for the Son, salvation from sin; and for the Holy Spirit, sanctification and the church), the sacraments, God's consummation of history, and church and society.

Each chapter opens with a brief scenario—a discussion among four church leaders about the confessions and what they have to teach us—followed by an explication of what the confessions say. The conclusion of each chapter returns readers to the concerns of the opening dialogue and offers questions for personal reflection or group discussion. Study leaders and groups may, of course, formulate their own questions for discussion.

While later chapters of this book build on earlier ones, readers are free to read selected chapters or to study them in a different order. A group that wishes to focus on the responsibilities of church leaders could discuss just the introduction and the conclusion. Alternatively, study groups that wish to explore the confessions' major teachings may decide to read only the central eleven chapters. Some groups may wish to study one chapter of the book each week over the course of several weeks or months. Another approach would be for a study leader to ask group members at one meeting to discuss the opening scenario of a particular chapter and then have them read the rest of the chapter at home and discuss it at their next meeting.

ABBREVIATIONS

AC 2.1–2.3	Apostles' Creed (second–eighth centuries)
BSF ##1–80	A Brief Statement of Faith (1991)
C*67* 9.01–9.56	Confession of 1967 (1967)
CB 10.1–10.9	Confession of Belhar (1982)
DB 8.01–8.28	Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934)
G-x.xxxx	Form of Government, in *Book of Order* (2017–19)
HC 4.001–4.129	Heidelberg Catechism (1562)
KJV	King James Version
NC 1.1–1.3	Nicene Creed (325, 381)
q(q).	question(s)
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SC 3.01–3.25	Scots Confession (1560)
SH 5.001–5.260	Second Helvetic Confession (1561)
W-x.xxxx	Directory for Worship, in *Book of Order* (2017–19)

WC 6.001–6.193	Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)
WLC 7.111–7.306	Westminster Larger Catechism (1648)
WSC 7.001–7.110	Westminster Shorter Catechism (1648)

INTRODUCTION

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CHURCH LEADERS FOR THE *BOOK OF CONFESSIONS*

Opening Prayer: *Holy and merciful God, you call us to declare who we are, what we believe, and what we resolve to do as followers of Jesus Christ. May we confess our faith in a way that deepens our commitment to you and to the life and witness of your church. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*[1]

Martha: All four of us will be ordained as elders or deacons on Sunday, and when I think about the vows that we will be taking, well, I don't know about you, but I wonder whether I'm really ready.

Jerry: I was thinking about that too, how we as church leaders are making commitments to know the Bible, the church's confessions, and the church's Form of Government. That's a tall order.

Lisa: I find the *Book of Confessions* especially hard to get into. Some of the confessions use words and ideas that I have never encountered before.

1. Based on chapter 2 of the Form of Government, "The Church and Its Confessions," G-2.0100 and G-2.0500b.

Max: And are these documents from so long ago even relevant today? It may be interesting to know what people believed in the past, but does it make any difference for the practical business that we will be transacting?

People called to office in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—ministers, elders, and deacons alike—take a series of vows when they are ordained. These vows commit them to knowing and using the Bible and the church's confessions. But just as the Bible is complex, so too is the *Book of Confessions.* It is not easy to pick it up on our own. How the different confessions work together to offer a coherent understanding of the essential tenets of the Reformed faith is not immediately clear, and their language is sometimes antiquated and confusing.[2]

Leader training often takes a historical approach to the confessions. In that case, we describe the social and religious context in which each confession was written and identify the specific issues of faith to which it was responding. This approach reminds us that the confessions come from times and places other than our own. So, while we may sometimes be able to draw parallels between their affirmations and what we need to confess today, we will also be aware of our distance from them. We will likely use different words.

As valuable as history is, this book takes a different approach. While appreciating the historical character of the confessions, it focuses on the major theological themes that run through them. And rather than explicating each confession individually, this book aims at providing a reliable guide to the *Book of Confessions* as a whole. Readers will receive an introduction to key affirmations of the Christian faith as developed by the Reformed tradition up to the present day. This book is a little primer in the basic beliefs that we hold as Christians in the Reformed tradition.

2. The word "Reformed" refers to those churches based on the theology of the sixteenth-century Reformer John Calvin (and to a lesser extent Ulrich Zwingli). John Knox brought Calvin's ideas to Scotland, where the Reformed churches became known as "Presbyterian" because of their principle of being ruled by "presbyters" (elders), both teaching elders (ministers) and ruling elders.

In addition, this book invites church leaders to explore what the confessions mean for the practical decisions that they will make as members of sessions and boards of deacons. How can the confessions guide ministers, elders, and deacons as they consider how to use money, minister to the dying, or celebrate baptism and the Lord's Supper? How can a session or a board of deacons learn to refer as often to the *Book of Confessions* as to the *Book of Order* to orient its work?

This book will be especially helpful to sessions as they train new leaders and provide for the continuing education of their members; to presbytery committees on preparation for ministry as they guide and instruct candidates for the ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament; to seminary students preparing for ordination examinations; to pastors, elders, and deacons when asked what Presbyterians and other Christians in the Reformed tradition believe; and indeed to anyone who simply wants to know more about Reformed belief and practice. Reformed confessions have never been meant just for Presbyterians; they represent a rich spiritual legacy that belongs to all Christians, even as members of other churches affirm the special insights of their own traditions.

The first ordination vow asks us to put our trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the One through whom we know God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[3] In the second vow, we promise to accept the Scriptures as the unique and authoritative witness to Christ. The third vow then turns to the church's confessions: "Do you receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?"

A good deal is packed into these words. Note, first, that we are not asked to subscribe to every word in the *Book of Confessions*, but rather to receive and adopt their "essential tenets." But just

3. For a list of the ordination vows, see the Appendix.

what are these essential tenets? Nowhere has the church listed them. While chapter 2 of the Form of Government (see G-2.0500) does state some of the "great themes" of the Reformed tradition (election, covenant, stewardship, and justice), it does not call them essential tenets. And the absence of a list is not an oversight. Rather, our Reformed tradition has understood presbyteries (in the case of ministers) and sessions (in the case of elders and deacons) to be charged to discern, in direct conversation with candidates for ordination, whether they do indeed receive and adopt what is essential in the confessions.

No checklist can do the job because one person's way of expressing the faith differs from another's. We do not always use the same language or concepts even when we believe the same things. Moreover, while some essentials continue over time (such as God as Creator, or Jesus Christ as human and divine), others seem to fall away or newly to emerge. In the early twentieth century, some Christians believed that a literal understanding of the virgin birth was an essential; others, however, regarded it as a symbolic way of pointing to the uniqueness of Christ. And today, many of us would regard a commitment to combating racism as essential to Christian faith, whereas the Reformation-era confessions say nothing about it.

A second key element of the third ordination vow is its description of the confessions as "authentic and reliable expositions of Scripture." Let us, for a moment, think about the Bible and why and how we interpret it. In Scripture, we encounter diverse materials from many different centuries of Israel's and the church's life. It is not obvious how these materials fit together or how we should make sense of apparent contradictions between one biblical affirmation and another. Moreover, the Scriptures have been and can be interpreted from many different points of view. Who is right? We will need nothing less than God's assistance if we are to read Scripture rightly.

According to the Reformed tradition, God has guided the church in composing confessions to help us do just that. They declare that Scripture is the "unique and authoritative witness" to Jesus Christ. In it we read of God's promise to Israel of a coming

Messiah; of Jesus' birth, ministry, suffering, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and promised return; and of the early church's experience of the living, resurrected Christ in its midst through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, the third ordination vow asks church leaders to be "instructed and led" by the confessions, while the next ordination question (*4*) summarizes the first three and commits us to be "guided" by the confessions. "Instructed," "led," "guided": these words ask us to attend carefully, faithfully, and continually to the confessions and their teachings. As the Form of Government notes, while the confessions are "subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him, . . . 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" (G-2.0200). The confessions matter, because they "guide the church in its study and interpretation of Scripture, . . . summarize the essence of Christian tradition, . . . direct the church in maintaining sound doctrine, [and] equip the church for its work of proclamation" (G-2.0100). The church promises us that if we are instructed, led, and guided by the confessions, we will know Christ more fully and will live more faithfully as his disciples.

The practical relevance of the *Book of Confessions* becomes especially evident when the Form of Government lists the church's expectations of those who serve in church office: All "who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historical confessional standards of the church" (G-6.0106b). Moreover, "it is necessary to the health and integrity of the church that the persons who serve in it as officers shall adhere to the essentials of the Reformed faith and polity as expressed in the *Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government" (G-6.0108).

The specific duties of ministers, elders, and deacons underline the importance of the *Book of Confessions* to church office. Ministers are "to commend the gospel to all persons . . . [by] studying,

teaching, and preaching the Word of God" (G-6.0201b). For this reason, inquirers and candidates for the ministry of Word and Sacrament should have "familiarity with the Bible and the confessions" (G-14-0412), and they will be expected to demonstrate this familiarity on the church's ordination examinations.

Elders and deacons too should be well grounded in the confessions, because the first "duty of elders, individually and jointly, [is] to strengthen and nurture the faith and life of the congregation committed to their charge" (G-6.0304; see also G-10.0102), while deacons are responsible for "sympathy, witness, and service after the example of Jesus Christ . . . to those who are in need" (G-6.0401–2). The Form of Government charges the session to "provide for a period of study and preparation [for both elders and deacons], after which the session shall examine the officers elect as to their personal faith; knowledge of the doctrine, government, and discipline contained in the Constitution of the church; and the duties of the office" (G-14.0240). Because the *Book of Confessions* is part 1 of the church's Constitution, it is an essential part of this training.

The Form of Government further prescribes that, once constituted, the session is to "engage in a process for education and mutual growth of [its] members" (G-10.0102k). Continuing education that includes the *Book of Confessions* and its theological foundations will help pastors and elders grow in faith, so that they are better able to articulate what the church believes and to invite others into new life in Christ (see G.10-0102a). Continuing study of the confessions is of equal importance for deacons.

The ordination vows suggest that every church leader should have a copy of the Bible, the *Book of Confessions*, and the *Book of Order* on their nightstand or a nearby reference shelf. They are the church's foundational resources for pointing us to Christ and guiding our believing and doing. They summarize what Presbyterians believe.

The guidebook that you presently have in hand has neither their authority nor their wisdom, but if it helps you open the *Book of Confessions* more often and understand its teachings more fully, it will have succeeded in its purpose.

FOR DISCUSSION

Concerns Raised in the Opening Dialogue

Am I ready to serve as an ordained church leader?
Understanding the confessions seems like an awfully tall order.
The language of the confessions is sometimes dated and difficult.
Are the confessions really relevant to the work that we will do as church leaders?

Questions

1. What concerns do you have as you consider your call to serve as a church officer (minister, elder, or deacon)?
2. Have you ever encountered the *Book of Confessions* before? What are your impressions of it?
3. Why do you think the church asks you to be led, instructed, and guided by the confessions?
4. How do you think they might strengthen your service as a church leader?

CHAPTER 1

WHY DO WE HAVE CONFESSIONS, AND WHAT ARE THEY?

Opening Prayer: *Holy God, teach us to confess you as the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; the Lord Jesus Christ, who is God of God and Light of Light; and the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life. Teach us to proclaim your story of salvation, which reaches from the creation of all things visible and invisible to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. And guard us as your church that we may be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. In Christ's name. Amen.*[1]

Martha: I notice that the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has two parts: a *Book of Confessions* (part 1) and a *Book of Order* (part 2). How do they fit together?

Jerry: That's a good question. It seems to me that the confessions should make a difference for the way we govern the church, but I have no idea how we would make practical use of them.

1. Based on the Nicene Creed.

Lisa: I see that the *Book of Confessions* has twelve documents representing nearly twenty centuries of Christian history. They can't all be talking about the same thing.

Max: Well, even though we have taken vows to be guided and instructed by them, I'm not even sure what a confession is.

When we hear the word "confession," we often think about the Bible's charge to us to confess our sins. But confession can also mean declaring what we believe, as we see in the opening words of the First Letter of John: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1 John 1:1).

The church of Jesus Christ came into existence because of what the first disciples had experienced: that the Jesus who had died on the cross was now the Jesus whom God had raised from the dead. The new way of life that Jesus' followers had received from their Savior on earth had not come to an end with his death. God had been faithful still. Early Christians, therefore, could not keep quiet about what they had experienced. Like their Hebrew forebears, they searched for the right words to make witness to God's mighty acts. Jewish Christian communities declared that Jesus is the Christ (Greek for Messiah; see, for example, Mark 8:29). Gentile Christian communities proclaimed Jesus as Lord (typical for Paul, as in Rom. 10:9).

Soon other and more developed confessions of faith emerged:

> Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him. . . . (Phil. 2:6–9)

> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,

> things visible and invisible. . . . He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead. . . . (Col. 1:15–18)

> He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory. (1 Tim. 3:16)

Christians further developed their confession of Jesus Christ, the Lord, as they delivered sermons, wrote letters, and composed gospels. Each of the New Testament writings is an extended reflection on what it means that the crucified One is now the risen Son of God.

The Old Testament, too, came to be understood as witnessing (in advance) to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection: "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The LORD displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders" (Deut. 6:21). Now Christians had experienced the greatest wonder of all: God's raising Jesus from the dead.

Confessing the faith has five dimensions, and they characterize the documents in the *Book of Confessions*:

First, the church's confessions *grow out of* Christians' deep, inner conviction that Jesus has risen indeed from the dead. Confessing is a matter of both heart and head. When we feel "convicted," we publicly declare what we believe to be true and trustworthy.

Second, the church's confessions are an effort to *understand* our conviction that "he is risen." In the words of the great medieval theologian Anselm of Canterbury, "Faith seeks understanding." Those who confess Jesus' resurrection want to know what their faith means for every area of their lives.

Third, the church's confessions aim at *strengthening* our conviction that Christ truly lives. They offer us an anchor in times of confusion and doubt. They bind us to a truth that is larger than ourselves. People who make confession cannot easily be manipulated. They know who they are and to whom they belong.

Fourth, the church's confessions *convey* our conviction about the resurrection to the world around us. Our confession of faith can awaken faith in others. God can and does use our faith, however weak, to bring other people to faith, so that they will join in the church's confession.

Fifth, the church's confessions demand that we *commit* our very lives to what convicts us. The confessions ask us to acknowledge that we are no longer our own but rather belong to the One who has been raised from the dead and raises us to new life in the Spirit. And confessing the faith may sometimes mean sacrificing even our physical lives. Since the earliest centuries of the church's life, there have been Christian believers who were willing, if necessary, to die for their faith.

This willingness to die for God's truth has itself been a form of confession—in Greek, the word "martyr" means witness. As Ignatius of Antioch wrote so vividly in the early second century, "Come fire, cross, battling with wild beasts, wrenching of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil—only let me get to Jesus Christ!"

The *Book of Order* states that the church adopts confessions in order to declare "to its members and the world

> who and what we believe
> what it [the church] believes
> what it resolves to do." (G-2.0100)

The church's confessions are more than personal statements of faith, although individuals may claim the confessions for themselves. The documents in the *Book of Confessions* represent what we together as a church have resolved to believe and do. This kind of public, corporate confession of faith has typically taken place when the church has felt that it can no longer remain silent.

Sometimes the church has confessed its faith in response to particular crises in a confused and troubled world: The Confession of 1967 called for reconciliation in a United States riven by war, racial discrimination, and other social conflicts. The Confession of

Belhar spoke out against apartheid as practiced in South Africa until the 1990s.

At other times the church has chosen to confess its faith because of disagreements within the church itself. The Nicene Creed responded to an early church heresy that regarded Christ as less than God. The Theological Declaration of Barmen sought to clarify faithfulness to the gospel in a time in which some Christians in Germany welcomed Hitler as a new Lord and Savior.

At still other times, the church has written confessions in an effort to deepen its unity. In the sixteenth century, the Heidelberg Catechism aimed at the peaceful coexistence of Lutherans and Calvinists. A Brief Statement of Faith gave expression to the reunion of northern and southern Presbyterians in 1983. And some confessions have resulted from the church's efforts to state more systematically and comprehensively what it believes, as in the case of the Westminster Confession of Faith and its two catechisms.

While each confessional document comes out of a specific situation in the past, the church has adopted these confessions for the present. Just how does that work? On the one hand, it would be a mistake to see the church's historic confessions as divinely revealed truths set in stone, never to be supplemented or revised. Reformed Christians have always been open to amending their confessions or writing new ones when circumstances arise that call for clarifying what we resolve to believe or do. On the other hand, the church's confessions are not merely curious artifacts from a remote, ancient world. They are not dead museum pieces, only of interest to enthusiasts of history.

The ordination vows to accept and receive the confessions' essential tenets and to be instructed, led, and guided by the confessions suggest that the confessions are distillations of the church's best wisdom from over the centuries. The confessions are not equivalent in authority to Scripture, but they do have key insights that help us read the Bible as the authoritative witness to Jesus Christ. The confessions are provisional and limited expressions of faith from past times and places, yet they have unique value for us in the present, precisely because they help us see beyond our own time and place.

We might regard the confessions as beloved grandparents or elderly friends. Our elders cannot live our lives for us. Often they are unfamiliar with the social forces that have shaped us as a younger generation. Elderly people sometimes seem old-fashioned and part of a passing age. But wise elders have insights about living and growing older that we do not yet have. Their life experience offers us points of view that we might never discover on our own. Perhaps more than ever the church needs that kind of wisdom today. In an era of rapid social and technological changes, Christians often struggle to know what the church should be and do. We long for a compelling vision of Christian faith and life. We want to be able to say more clearly what is so special about our faith. The confessions can help us see our way ahead.

For most of its history in North America, the Presbyterian Church was guided by the Westminster Standards of the seventeenth century—the Confession of Faith, the Larger Catechism, and the Shorter Catechism. Whenever the church arrived at new confessional insight, it amended the Confession of Faith. In the late 1950s, the United Presbyterian Church formed a committee to propose additional revisions. The committee soon concluded, however, that the church needed a new confession of faith, in addition to the historical legacy represented by Westminster. The result was the Confession of 1967 and the creation of a *Book of Confessions* that united documents from early Christianity, the Reformation, Westminster, and the twentieth century.

The idea of a *Book of Confessions* was not entirely new. Early Reformation churches had sometimes adopted several confessional statements. Nevertheless, for North American Presbyterians, having a *Book of Confessions*, rather than just the Westminster documents, raised new questions. Were newer confessions more authoritative than older ones? Or vice versa? How should the church resolve differences or even contradictions among the confessions?[2]

2. For a discussion of these issues, see the "Confessional Nature of the Church Report" (1997), which now appears as a preface to the *Book of Confessions*.

Even today, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is still feeling its way into how to use the *Book of Confessions*. Many church leaders, even pastors, do not know these documents well or how to put them together as a whole. When the church had only the Westminster Standards, the church's key teachings seemed clear. But what are the key teachings or "essential tenets" of twelve documents that come from such different times and places?

Nevertheless, there is wisdom in having a *Book of Confessions*. For one thing, the *Book of Confessions* represents the full sweep of historical insights that have shaped our church. And for another, despite their diversity of time and place, these documents are remarkably consistent in what they teach. Their differences are minor compared to what they affirm in common. It is these commonalities—these shared, core affirmations of what the church believes and resolves to do—that we will explore in this book. We will think of the *Book of Confessions* as a good teacher who welcomes various points of view but then draws them together into a coherent vision of who God is and therefore of who we are.

When the *Book of Confessions* was adopted in 1967, it included the Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed, the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Second Helvetic Confession, the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Shorter Catechism, the Theological Declaration of Barmen, and the Confession of 1967. At the time of reunion, the Larger Catechism, which had been one of the standards of the (southern) Presbyterian Church in the U.S., was added, and a new confession (A Brief Statement of Faith) was commissioned. In 2016, the church adopted the Confession of Belhar, after narrowly rejecting it four years earlier.

The *Book of Confessions* opens with two short, succinct statements of belief (known as creeds) that have been a part of worship for large parts of the Christian world since the early centuries: the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed. The Nicene Creed was composed in the fourth century in response to an influential Christian thinker, Arius, who regarded Jesus Christ, the Son, as the highest of all creatures but less than God. First drafted by the Council of Nicaea in 325 and then completed by a second council in Constantinople in

381, the Nicene Creed makes clear that the Father and the Son are two persons but one substance. Jesus Christ is nothing less than "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father" (NC 1.2)

The Nicene Creed is the most universal of the church's confessions, since it is accepted by Orthodox, Catholic, and many Protestant bodies. Historically, it has been used in conjunction with celebration of the Lord's Supper, as the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* also recommends. In 1991, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted an inclusive language translation.

The roots of the Apostles' Creed lie in the answers that adult converts gave as they received Christian baptism in the church's first centuries. Over time, these declarations of belief about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were developed further, until in the eighth century the Western church adopted a standard version. Among Catholics and many Protestants today, the Apostles' Creed is the best-known of the church's ancient confessions, but it is not used by Orthodox Churches. Because of the creed's association with baptism, the *Book of Common Worship* recommends reciting it whenever a baptism or a reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant is celebrated.

Like the Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed has a Trinitarian structure, with individual sections devoted to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Both creeds are also structured to relate the entire biblical story of salvation, beginning with the creation, moving to the coming of Christ, and concluding with the life of the church and the hope for the resurrection and the world to come.

The next set of documents in the *Book of Confessions*—the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Second Helvetic Confession—belong to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. Each of these confessions is expansive and comprehensive, laying out the major doctrines of the Christian faith, roughly in the Trinitarian order of the ancient creeds.

Interestingly, the *Book of Confessions* does not include a confessional document directly from the hand of John Calvin (such as the Geneva Catechism or the French Confession), but one of Calvin's close disciples, John Knox, was a principal author of the Scots

Confession. Composed after a protracted period of conflict between Scottish leaders and Britain's Catholic monarchs, the confession's opening words reflect the forceful confidence of the new Protestant church (or, in the language of the Scots Confession, "the Kirk"): "We confess and acknowledge one God alone, to whom alone we must cleave, whom alone we must serve, whom only we must worship, and in whom alone we put our trust" (SC 3.01).

The circumstances of the Heidelberg Catechism were quite different. The new Protestant movement, despite its core affirmations of "grace alone, faith alone, and Scripture alone," soon split into rival groups. To Calvin's deep regret, he could not overcome disagreement with followers of Martin Luther or Ulrich Zwingli about the nature of the Lord's Supper. The Heidelberg Catechism, written soon after Calvin's death, represented an effort to bring peace between Calvinists and Lutherans in an area of western Germany known as the Palatinate.

Catechisms had developed in medieval Catholicism as a way to teach the faith with questions and answers. The Heidelberg Catechism uses this format to explicate the three major catechetical documents of Western Christianity: the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. The catechism is divided into fifty-two sections; ministers traditionally preached on one section each Sunday afternoon over the course of a year.

In contrast to the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism is irenic in tone, as evident in its famous opening words: "Question: What is your only comfort, in life and in death? Answer: That I belong—soul and body, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ" (HC 4.01). Historically, the Heidelberg Catechism became especially important to Dutch Calvinist churches, but its evangelical warmth has made it a favorite of many other Reformed believers as well. In 2014, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted a revised translation.

The third Reformation-era document, the Second Helvetic Confession, also has a personal, irenic tone. Written by the Reformer Heinrich Bullinger, successor to Zwingli in Zurich, Switzerland, the Second Helvetic Confession was a personal favorite of Professor Edward Dowey, who moderated the committee that prepared

the Confession of 1967 and the *Book of Confessions*. The Second Helvetic Confession is especially noteworthy for its attention to matters of Christian life and ministry, including decoration of sanctuaries, singing, fasting, visiting the sick, and burying the dead. Nevertheless, this confession, the longest document in the *Book of Confessions*, remains the least known of all of them.

The Westminster Standards of the seventeenth century follow. Until the revision of ordination questions at the time of the adoption of the *Book of Confessions*, Presbyterian candidates for ministry were asked "to sincerely receive and adopt [the Westminster Confession of Faith] as containing the *system* of doctrine taught in the holy Scriptures" (my italics). The Confession of Faith indeed takes the central teachings of the Reformation-era confessions and explicates them in a logical, systematic way.

Prepared by the Westminster Assembly of Divines in England in the 1640s, the Confession of Faith became *the* confession of the Scottish Presbyterian Church and then the new Presbyterian churches in America. The Confession of Faith was amended in 1788 to reflect the separation of church and state in the new nation. Other major modifications came in 1903, when the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. reunited.

The Cumberland Presbyterians had broken off from the larger Presbyterian body in the early nineteenth century under the influence of the Second Great Awakening. The evangelistic campaigns of the American frontier (such as in Kentucky) asked people to make a personal decision for Christ. This emphasis on human agency seemed to contradict Westminster's teaching about predestination, the idea that God alone has determined from eternity who will or will not be saved. The amendments of 1903 clarify that the church's confession of predestination must be held in harmony with human freedom and Christian missions. The Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (Southern Presbyterian Church) adopted the same changes in 1942 but inserted them in a different place. In the 1950s, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. modified Westminster's teachings about divorce and remarriage, and again the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. followed suit, though with somewhat different language.

The end result was two slightly different versions of the Confession of Faith. When the northern and southern denominations reunited, the new church did not try to harmonize these differences. Rather, it laid out the Confession of Faith with separate columns for the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. and the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. wherever their versions differed.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism was long popular for teaching children basic Christian doctrine. The Westminster Assembly prepared the Larger Catechism to guide preachers in presenting the church's beliefs. Both catechisms give extended attention to the Ten Commandments as a guide to the Christian life.

The last part of the *Book of Confessions* is composed of twentieth-century documents: the Theological Declaration of Barmen, the Confession of 1967, the Confession of Belhar, and A Brief Statement of Faith. None of these aims at being as comprehensive or systematic as the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century documents. Rather, the twentieth-century confessions accept the doctrinal foundations of the earlier statements while speaking to specific challenges of the contemporary world.

The Theological Declaration of Barmen was prepared in 1934 at a synod of the Confessing Church, that part of the German Evangelical (that is, Lutheran and Reformed) Church that resisted Hitler's efforts to control it. The Declaration speaks out against another church group known as the German Christians, which sought to merge Christianity with Hitler's Aryan ideology about German superiority. The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth was a principal author of this confession, and it reflects some of his key ideas, such as grounding all theology in the biblical witness to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. The Declaration is organized into six theses, each of which opens with scriptural references and concludes with a rejection of false teaching.

The other three twentieth-century confessions also reflect the influence of Barthian theology. The Confession of 1967 discusses Christ's reconciling work before turning to the work of the Father and of the Holy Spirit. The Confession of 1967 then focuses on the need for the church to work for reconciliation in response to racial

discrimination, international conflict, poverty, and the confusion about sexuality that characterizes modern societies.

The Confession of Belhar is named after the town in which it was drafted by leaders of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1982. Like the Confession of 1967, the Confession of Belhar emphasizes Christ's reconciling work and applies it specifically to the church, which is called to overcome racial prejudice and difference in its own life and the world. And similar to the Theological Declaration of Barmen, each section of the Confession of Belhar states both what the church believes and what it rejects. The version in the *Book of Confessions* uses inclusive language.

Like the Confession of 1967, A Brief Statement of Faith, adopted in 1991, discusses the person and work of Christ before moving to God (the One whom Jesus called Father [BSF #28]) and the Holy Spirit. Although longer than the ancient creeds, the Brief Statement as a whole, or significant portions of it, is short and simple enough to be recited in worship. The document lifts up the equality of men and women (both of whom are called "to all ministries of the church"), "voices of people long silenced," and "the planet entrusted to our care" (BSF ##64, 70, and 38).[3]

All who become members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are asked to confess that "Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior." People called to ordained offices take additional vows that build on this foundation. As we have seen, we promise to "accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church" and to "receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as

3. For further information about the historical context and key teachings of each confession, see the brief introductions in the *Book of Confessions*. Other helpful resources include the following: Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: An Introduction to the Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991); Joseph D. Small, ed., *Conversations with the Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2005); and *Book of Confessions: Study Edition* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1999), rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017). For a more scholarly treatment, see Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do."

The confessions are the corporate wisdom of the church from over the centuries. We turn to them in the conviction that we are more apt to come to God's truth when we struggle together with others to read the Scriptures in order to know Jesus Christ. We look to the wider communion of saints for help—both those around us here and now and those who have gone on ahead of us. Our wise grandparents and elders now speak to us through the confessions.

FOR DISCUSSION

Concerns Raised in the Opening Dialogue

How do the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order* fit together?
How can church leaders make use of the *Book of Confessions* for practical decision making?
The confessions come from such different times and places that they can't all be talking about the same thing.
What is a confession?

Questions

1. Have you ever tried to write a personal confession of faith? What would you include in it?
2. Which, if any, of the confessions are you already familiar with? Are there any that have a special meaning for you?
3. Who has been a wise elder for your personal walk in faith?
4. Why do you think confessions are important for the life of the church?