

A Brief Statement of Faith

Introduction to <i>Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding</i>	3
A Brief Statement of Faith	4
Introduction to <i>A Brief Statement of Faith</i>	6
Session 1. A New Confession for a New Denomination	7
Session 2. Trusting in the One Triune God	13
Session 3. Trusting in Jesus Christ	19
Session 4. Trusting in God.....	25
Session 5. Trusting in the Holy Spirit	31
Session 6. Being Presbyterian.....	37
Suggestions for Further Study.....	43

A New Confession for a New Denomination

Scripture

Psalm 107:1–3 The psalmist praises God’s goodness and love and urges those who know God in this way to express their faith in God’s deliverance and salvation.

Romans 10:5–13 This passage shows the need for us to confess our faith in Jesus as Lord and to express this belief with our lips.

Prayer

O God, you have revealed yourself in the Scriptures and in Jesus Christ. Help us to know and understand what you have to say to us. Help us to look to your Word for guidance and to your Son as our Savior and Lord. Help us say what we believe to others. Through words and deeds, may we bring your presence and your Word into the lives of others. Help our church to provide a clear message of your reconciling love for the world, and may we through mission and ministry live out what we say we believe. Amen.

Introduction

The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America [PC(USA)] was formed on June 9, 1983, as a family reunion. Two long-standing American Presbyterian denominations had existed since the time of the Civil War. They had broken apart over the war and had never reunited. Now that long national division was ended.

The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (called the northern church) and the Presbyterian Church in the United States (the southern church) came together in Atlanta, Georgia, to culminate a fourteen-year process for a plan of reunion. Each General Assembly of the two churches voted to approve the plan so separated Presbyterians could be joined together in a united church.

Presbyterians are known as people who try to do things decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40). This applies both to our beliefs and to our practices. We want to proceed in the things most important to us in ways that reflect the nature and character of the

God we serve for God is a God not of disorder (v. 33). Because of this, Presbyterian processes for carrying out significant actions take time. Of course, the time it took to reunite the two denominations was much too long.

With the reunion and the new denomination, new opportunities and tasks arose. One of these tasks was to write a new statement of belief that could be used by the new PC(USA) as a basis for its theological identity and unity. Each denomination had its own confessional documents. However, the plan for reunion specified that while the older confessions would be kept, the new church also needed a new confession of faith. Preparing such a document would be a major task, but it was important. One of the first actions of the new church was to appoint a special committee to draft a brief statement of the Reformed faith—a statement that could be added to the *Book of Confessions*, the collection of ten statements of beliefs already in place in the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Much work was ahead!

Confessing Our Faith

Presbyterians are part of the Reformed theological tradition. This tradition extends back to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. At that time, Martin Luther (1483–1546) questioned the theology and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. This set off a widespread movement over Europe with those who sought the reform of the church becoming known as Protestants. Protestant comes from the Latin term *protestare*, which means “to witness.” Protestants are people who want to witness, declare, or testify to their faith.

Followers of Luther became known as Lutherans. There were others, however, who like Luther rejected the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, but did not agree with Luther on all aspects of theology or Christian teaching. Several of these reformers were Huldreich Zwingli (1484–1531), John Calvin (1509–1564), and Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575). John Calvin became the most prominent of the group that sought the reform of the church based on the Word of God. Scripture is to be the standard by which we know and believe what God wants to communicate with us. The Scriptures point toward Jesus Christ, whom Christians believe is our Lord and Savior. Therefore, the church should listen to God’s revelation in Scripture, express its belief, and live out its practices

based on God’s Word in Scripture. Calvin and his followers are sometimes called Calvinists, but more generally called Reformed.

Presbyterian is the form of church government favored by Calvin. The central unit of the church’s governing structure is the presbytery, where ministers and elders—lay leaders for local congregations—carry out the work of the church.

Calvin’s theological views spread through Europe into Great Britain and then to the United States. As they did, the Reformed theological tradition developed numerous confessions of faith to express Reformed people’s beliefs about the Christian faith. Wherever Reformed churches were established, they very often put together a statement or confession of their beliefs. So we have many Reformed confessions stretching back to the sixteenth century.

The *Book of Confessions* of the PC(USA) features documents from the early church, the Reformation period, and the twentieth century. These documents include the Nicene Creed, the Apostles’ Creed, the Scots Confession (1560), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), the Westminster Standards (1647; Confession of Faith; Shorter and Larger Catechism), the Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934), the Confession of 1967 (1967), and A Brief Statement of Faith. These present a panorama of Reformed theological views, expressed in the thought forms and language of their specific times and places. Some of these are full summaries of Christian belief; others are more

oriented toward specific issues. They are a chorus of Reformed voices witnessing to the Reformed faith through the church’s history.

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With the reunion of the churches in 1983, American Presbyterians wanted to do what their theological ancestors had done by confessing their Christian faith anew. As Reformed Christians, they practiced the advice of the ancient psalmist: “Let the redeemed of the LORD, say so” (Psalm 107:2).

A Long and Winding Road

In May 1984, the moderator of the 1983 reuniting General Assembly of the new denomination, Dr. J. Randolph Taylor, appointed a

diverse committee of twenty-one persons, representative of the richness of the new denomination, to prepare “a brief statement of Reformed faith for possible inclusion in the *Book of Confessions*,” as called for by the Articles of Agreement of the church. This group embarked on a long and winding road toward what eventually became a new document in the *Book of Confessions: A Brief Statement of Faith—Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*.¹

The committee of twenty-one worked for four years and unanimously agreed on a “Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith.” In February 1988, this draft document was sent to the churches of the denomination for comment. Fifteen thousand response forms were returned, and there were extended comments from 1,760 individuals and groups. In light of these responses, the committee amended its document, and a revised draft was sent to the 1989 General Assembly.

Next, the church’s constitutional process for amending the *Book of Confessions* began. A committee of fifteen (which actually had sixteen members) was appointed to consider the report and recommendations of the special committee. This group had the power to revise the document. After four months, it met with the original special committee and after discussions was ready to present a revised document to the 1990 General Assembly.

At the assembly, the standing committee of the assembly examined the document and sent it unchanged to the floor of the assembly. Ninety-four percent of the commissioners to the General Assembly voted favorably, and the document was passed. During the next year, this statement was sent to the denomination’s presbyteries,

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where it needed to receive a two-thirds majority vote to become part of the *Book of Confessions*. This it received, with 166 presbyteries voting in favor and two against. At the 1991 General Assembly, the final vote was taken by the Assembly’s commissioners with the result being 412 in favor, 40 opposed, and 16 abstentions. This meant that A Brief Statement of Faith became part of the *Book of Confessions* and thus an important part of our

1. The story of this process is told in Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), ch. 11.

Presbyterian theological heritage, an expression of Christian faith to share with the world.²

The process of amending the *Book of Confessions* takes numerous steps. This is to ensure checks and balances along the way since this is such an important undertaking. In this case, input from the whole denomination was solicited, and some of the church's best theologians engaged in preparing the document.

A Brief Statement of Faith

The new confessional document is significant in a number of ways.

While the special committee was to produce a "Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith," the final name is A Brief Statement of Faith. This emphasizes that the statement wants to confess what the universal body of Christians believe. First and foremost, Presbyterians are Christians. Our perspectives on the universal Christian faith are certainly shaped by our Reformed tradition, but the decision was made to adopt a wide, ecumenical posture with the name of the statement, so it can be read and discussed in many Christian communities. The preface to the statement (which does not have confessional authority) says, "This statement therefore intends to confess the catholic faith." However, it goes on to say, "We are convinced that to the Reformed churches a distinctive vision of the catholic faith has been entrusted for the good of the whole church." This means the statement includes "the major themes of the Reformed tradition."³

An important feature of A Brief Statement of Faith is that it is to be used in teaching and worship. A number of the confessions

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in the *Book of Confessions* are long and complicated. While the theological ideas in the statement are profound, they are presented in fresh and accessible language. It conveys the basics of Reformed theological beliefs but does so in a style that "names such beliefs while inviting and encouraging its readers to explore more fully their rich meanings."⁴

2. See William C. Placher and David Willis-Watkins, *Belonging to God: A Commentary on A Brief Statement of Faith* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 9. The authors were members of the special committee appointed to write the statement.

3. See the preface in the *Book of Confessions*. Note is made of a listing of important Reformed themes in the *Book of Order*, G-2.

4. "Introduction to A Brief Statement of Faith—Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)," in *Book of Confessions: Study Edition* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1996), p. 334.

The statement acquaints us with key elements of our Reformed faith while opening doors for further explorations on these important theological ideas in the context of the whole, ecumenical church.

A Brief Statement of Faith is also useful for congregational worship. Sometimes churches use the whole confession as a creed in worship, and other times only parts of it are used. Liturgical use is important to shape our theological understandings.

A striking feature of the statement is its basic Trinitarian structure. That is, its three major portions are devoted to Trinity: God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Notice though, the order is Jesus Christ, God, and the Holy Spirit. This accords with the familiar New Testament benediction: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (2 Corinthians 13:13). This ordering expresses what we experience as Christians. We know God’s grace in Jesus Christ, as an expression of the love of God, and we are nurtured in our Christian lives in the church by the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. So while the statement instructs us theologically, it also nurtures us spiritually by naming the realities we experience as Christian people.

Spiritual Practice

Reflect on the statements or confessions of faith with which you are familiar. What parts of them are most important to you? Do you think of them or refer to them often? Why or why not? How can these confessions become a bigger part of your daily life?

Questions for Reflection

Why do Christians confess their beliefs, and why is it important for new confessions of faith to emerge in different times and places?

Glance over A Brief Statement of Faith. What features strike you? What looks to be especially helpful? In what ways does this statement provide both theological and spiritual direction?