

# Exploring the “Book of Confessions”

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## **Meet the Writer**

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## **Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding***

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

## To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

# The Nature and Function of Confessions

## Scripture

Philippians 2:11; 1 Corinthians 8:8–9; John 11:21–27; Acts 6:8–9, 7:54–60; Colossians 3:12–17

## Main Idea

Since biblical times, people have felt the need to affirm what they believe about God. In light of new events and changing understandings of the divine, groups of people throughout history have written confessions to declare what they believed and what they did not believe.

## Teaching Points

This session invites participants to:

1. Understand confession as an affirmation of faith, not as an admission of fault.
2. Explore the conditions that lead to writing confessions.
3. See how confessions witness to changing understandings of Scripture and the world.

## Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant's books

*Book of Confessions*

Self-adhesive notes

Pencils

Newsprint

Markers

## **Leader Prep**

The *Book of Confessions* is a valuable resource, sharing the faith from different times and places. That said, it is unfamiliar to many, even to those who have taken ordination vows to live by its essential tenets. This is not a time to make anyone feel guilty for not being aware of this gift to the church but a time to celebrate that they will know more after completing Dr. Rogers's study than they did before.

For some, the sheer difficulty of reading the *Book of Confessions* has led to avoiding it. However, in many churches the same creed is used virtually every week in worship, if any appears at all. That is unfortunate, as the church universal has much to say about the Christian faith. Moreover, in the course of worship it is both traditional and common to use the Nicene Creed when celebrating the Lord's Supper, and the Apostles' Creed during Baptism. Thus, simply observing events in the life of a congregation offers an opportunity to explore what we believe, using selections from this collection of faith statements.

Throughout this study, you will be leading your group in reading parts of the *Book of Confessions*. To this end, each person in your group needs to have access to a copy. Call the Presbyterian Distribution Service (800/524-2612), or go to [store.pcusa.org](http://store.pcusa.org) to purchase copies of this book. You can also go to [pcusa.org/resource/book-confessions](http://pcusa.org/resource/book-confessions) to download a free copy.

In preparation for leading this session, you may want to read chapter 2 of "The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity" from the *Book of Order*. This chapter explains the purpose of the confessions in the life of the church, which will serve as important background information for this session. Go to [store.pcusa.org](http://store.pcusa.org) to obtain a recent copy of the *Book of Order*.

## **Leading the Session**

### **Gather**

- Pray together the prayer in the participant's book.
- Call the participants' attention to their copies of the *Book of Confessions*, especially the table of contents. Ask: *What do you know about the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Book of Confessions?* Make sure the responses to this question include the following information:

The *Book of Confessions* is the first part of the two-part *Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*. The second part of the PC(USA)'s constitution is the *Book of Order*. The *Book of Confessions* contains eleven confessions of faith written over a period of more than 1,600 years.

## Head

- Dr. Rogers observes, “The term *confession* in these sessions does not mean an acknowledgment of guilt but an affirmation of what we most truly believe.”
- Read Philippians 2:11. Dr. Rogers notes that it is “the oldest Christian confession, perhaps part of an early hymn.” Ask: *Is this confession enough to declare one’s faith? Why or why not? Why have Christians felt the need to confess more than this?*
- Citing historic examples of slavery and the role of women, Dr. Rogers notes, “The writers of the confessions genuinely sought to express the revelation of God as they had found it in Scripture. At the same time, they were unconsciously conditioned by the common assumptions of their time and culture.” Ask: *What are the benefits and challenges to using the confessions from the Book of Confessions that were written over a period of hundreds of years?*
- Ask: *What types of changes in our faith or our world create the need for a new confession?*
- Read 1 Corinthians 8:8–9 and section 5.242 from the Second Helvetic Confession. Ask: *How do we distinguish between those things “we most truly believe” from those things that are not central to the faith?*

## Heart

- Read John 11:21–27. Dr. Rogers observes that “early, brief summations of doctrine were expected of new Christians who were candidates for baptism. These were called *creeds* from the Latin word *credo*, meaning ‘I believe.’ ” The word *credo* refers to the heart. Ask: *In what sense can you say your belief is heart-felt?*

- Dr. Rogers writes, “New church bodies tried to make clear why they disagreed with the medieval Roman Catholic Church and often why they disagreed with other Protestant groups.” (For example, the Scots Confession and Roman Catholicism, the Second Helvetic Confession and the Anabaptists, and the Westminster Confessions and High Church Anglicans.) Ask: *To what extent is it necessary to define who you are not in order to say who you are? What are the inherent dangers in defining who you are not when stating your faith?*
- Read Acts 6:8–9; 7:54–60. Many Christians have taken great risk to confess their belief in Jesus Christ. Some have suffered persecution and martyrdom for their faith. Ask: *For what beliefs are you willing to pay a price? What hinders you from speaking of your faith now?*

## Hands

- Read Colossians 3:12–17. Belief and action shape each other. For example, a church budget is a faith statement, a profession of what that church believes is most important. Ask: *How does your personal budget reflect your faith? How do the priorities in your life reflect what you believe? What changes can you make in your life in order for your priorities to better match your faith?*
- Distribute self-adhesive notes and pencils. On the self-adhesive notes, have participants write an issue that threatens the existence of the church or a great injustice in the world. Have participants post their notes on a sheet of newsprint.
- As a group, select one or two of the posted issues or injustices. As a group, write a two- or three-sentence confession for each of the selected injustices.
- Dr. Rogers writes, “Sometimes the church feels compelled to focus its attention on some threat to its existence or some great injustice in the world.” Ask: *How did it feel to write a confession in response to the injustices?*



## **Depart**

- Distribute pencils, and have participants turn to page 45 of the participant's book. Have participants write five short statements declaring five beliefs they have in the triune God and/or the church. Explain that they will visit this page at the end of each session, at which point they will have the opportunity to edit their five statements.
- Have participants select one of the posted self-adhesive notes that is not their own. As a closing prayer, have each person pray for the issue or injustice on his or her note.
- Encourage participants to place their self-adhesive notes in their participant's books and to continue to pray for the issue or injustice throughout the week.

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# The Nature and Function of Confessions

## Scripture

**Deuteronomy 6:4–9** The ancient Israelites were reminded that God brought them out of bondage and now they were to love and serve God!

**Matthew 16:13–16** Peter declares that Jesus is the Son of the Living God, the Messiah, the expected Savior of Israel.

**Philippians 2:11** The oldest Christian confession, perhaps part of an early hymn.

## Prayer

Almighty God: you alone are good and holy. Purify our lives and make us brave disciples. We do not ask you to keep us safe, but to keep us loyal, so we may serve Jesus Christ, who, tempted in every way as we are, was faithful to you.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The term *confession* in these sessions does not mean an acknowledgment of guilt but an affirmation of what we most truly believe. When we reflect on the meaning of what we have read in Scripture, we have ideas that begin to form doctrines. *Doctrine* comes from a Latin word that means “what is taught.” For example, when we reflect on a simple biblical phrase, as in the prayer “Our Father in heaven . . .” (Matthew 6:9), we have been taught several key ideas. We have a relationship to God (“Our”). It is a familial relationship (“Father”). This prayer is directed to one who transcends this earthly realm (“heaven”). When we combine many different statements about God, we have a *doctrine* of God.

Early, brief summations of doctrine were expected of new Christians who were candidates for baptism. These were called *creeds* from the Latin word *credo*, meaning “I believe.” The Apostles’ Creed (with roots in the second century) is an early

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baptismal creed. By the ninth century it was widely used and has been passed on to us. The Nicene Creed, in the fourth century, was the first official doctrinal statement of the whole church. It begins with the affirmation “We believe.”

The ancient creeds, the Nicene and Apostles’ creeds, were primary affirmations for the early church on into the Middle Ages. At the time of the renewal of the church that we call the Protestant Reformation, many national groups developed confessions. These were often lengthy treatises based on the ancient creeds and applied in detail to the new religious and cultural situations that people were facing. New church bodies tried to make clear why they disagreed with the medieval Roman Catholic Church and often why they disagreed with other Protestant groups. Thus different streams of confessions developed: for example, the Lutheran, the Anglican, the Anabaptist, and the Reformed. We Presbyterians are part of the Reformed stream, so called because our forebears in what we now call Switzerland sought to develop simpler forms of worship, belief, and practice based on Scripture. Queen Elizabeth I wrote that the Swiss were more Reformed than the Lutherans, and the name stuck.

## **The Purpose of Written Confessions**

All Christians confess their faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. At certain times, a church body, or denomination, may feel the need to put in writing some statements that publicly declare who the church is, what it believes, and what it intends to do. Whenever the church officially adopts a statement of belief, it becomes part of its *tradition*. As Presbyterians, we are Reformed in that we are grateful recipients of a vital tradition of Christian faith. We are also always reforming, or changing, as we reflect further on the Word of God as led by the Holy Spirit.

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There are many different occasions that may call a church to prepare a new statement of faith. Sometimes there is a lack of clarity, either within the church or in the world it lives in, regarding the identity of the church. That is the time for a *creed*, a brief statement of the sum of Christian belief. The Nicene Creed in the fourth century, the Apostles’ Creed in the ninth century, and A Brief

Statement of Faith (1991) are examples of creeds in our *Book of Confessions*.

At other times the basic Christian faith is known, but there is a need to develop further the distinctive characteristics that form the identity of a certain church. Such longer and more complex statements are called *confessions*. Some examples are the Scots Confession (1560) versus the Roman Catholics; the Second Helvetic (Swiss) Confession (1566) versus the Anabaptists; and the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms (1647), versus the High Church Anglicans. The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), in question-and-answer form, had as its purpose to create a Reformed community in an area dominated by Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches.

Sometimes the church feels compelled to focus its attention on some threat to its existence or some great injustice in the world. In the twentieth century, Reformed Christians did that by issuing strong *declarations*. The Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934) was a protest of the Confessing Church in Germany against the attempt of the Nazi government to control the church for political purposes. The Confession of 1967 in the United States spoke out against racial discrimination, war, enslaving poverty, and anarchy in sexual relations. The theme of this declaration of Christian faith is “In Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). The application is “Therefore, the church calls all people to be reconciled to God and to one another” (*Book of Confessions*, 9.07 [Inclusive Language Text]).

## **The Uses of Confessions**

Confessions have been, and can be, used in worship as a means of focusing our praise of God. The two ancient creeds have often been used in this way. Some congregations use parts of the confessions to affirm their faith in words of the historic Reformed tradition.

Confessions have often been used to make clear what the church believes over against perversions or omissions of basic doctrines of the faith. This is a difficult task in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) because we have a large *Book of Confessions* that few officers have actually read. The third vow (of eight) that deacons, ruling elders, and teaching elders must answer at their ordination asks, “Do you sincerely 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?” (*Book of Order* [2011–2013], W-4.4003).

The phrase “essential tenets” is meant to relieve office bearers from having to agree with every word in the confessions. But it does mean understanding the basic themes of the *Book of Confessions*. Chapter 2 of the “Foundations of Presbyterian Polity” of the *Book of Order* indicates faith statements that we share with all Christians (“the mystery of the triune God and the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ” [*Book of Order*, F-2.03]). It follows with an indication of affirmations we share with other Protestants (the authority of Scripture and justification by grace through faith). Finally, it points to at least six doctrines that are characteristic of the Reformed tradition (the sovereignty of God, election of the people of God for salvation and service, a covenant life ordered by the Word of God, a faithful stewardship of all God’s gifts, the sin of idolatry, and the call to work for the transformation of society).

These are examples of the kind of statements that are meant by “essential tenets.” Note that they are quite general (election, but not double predestination). They avoid the kind of specificity that would make them the property of only one school of thought. They are not exhaustive (there is no mention of church or sacraments). They point us back to Scripture, the written word of God, and to Jesus Christ, the living Word.

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*So the phrase “essential tenets” reminds us of our freedom as office bearers in the church.*

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So the phrase “essential tenets” reminds us of our freedom as office bearers in the church. Chapter 3 of the “Foundations of Presbyterian Polity” of the *Book of Order* under “Historic Principles of Church Order” quotes the Westminster Confession: “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith and worship” (*Book of Confessions*, 6.109; *Book of Order*, F-3.0101a). It also reminds us of our obligation to understand the threads of continuity that run through the *Book of Confessions* in which we identify Reformed doctrines that are essential to our Christian faith and life.

## **The Interpretation of Confessions**

The confessions are the work of competent and sincere but nonetheless limited and sinful people. The Westminster Confession

points to that reality: “All synods or councils since the apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both” (*Book of Confessions*, 6.175). The confessions are not intended as ecclesiastical laws regarding what we must believe or how we are to live our Christian lives. Rather, the confessions should be used for education. They enable us to view how our predecessors in the faith attempted to understand and live out their Christian faith.

The writers of the confessions genuinely sought to express the revelation of God as they had found it in Scripture. At the same time, they were unconsciously conditioned by the common assumptions of their time and culture. From the earliest colonial days in America, for nearly two hundred years, most Americans believed the enslavement of people of African descent was justified by Scripture. Nothing in the classical ancient or Reformation confessions suggested otherwise.

During that same period, most Americans sincerely believed women were not fit for public life and should not hold office. Two of the documents in the *Book of Confessions*, the Scots Confession (*Book of Confessions*, 3.22), and the Second Helvetic Confession (*Book of Confessions*, 5.191) contend that women are not allowed to perform ecclesiastical functions such as preaching or performing baptisms.

Good, intelligent, and devout Christian leaders opposed the emancipation of slaves and allowing women to vote. These white, male leaders unconsciously assumed their positions of power and privilege were given by God and supported by the confessions.

During the 1950s, Presbyterians changed their minds about racial discrimination and the subordination of women to men. The General Assemblies of Presbyterian denominations, North and South, self-consciously changed their interpretation of Scripture. They ceased treating the Bible as an encyclopedia of assorted truths. Rather, they saw the Bible as the story of God’s saving purpose through a saving person, Jesus Christ. The Bible should be read through the lens of Jesus’ redemptive life and ministry.

Similarly, the confessions were no longer claimed to be perfect replicas of biblical truth that could never be improved. People now acknowledged the confessions bore the imprint of the history and culture in which they were written. Confessions, even the venerable Westminster Confession, could be amended. New confessions could be written that would correct some of the errors of their

predecessors; for example A Brief Statement of Faith (1991) corrects the limitations on women of the Reformation confessions.

The authors of our confessions were courageous and clear-eyed Christians who put their understanding of God's Word and will into writing. Our task is not to enshrine their words as infallible and unchangeable. It is rather to show the same courage by learning from them and applying our understanding of Scripture and confessions in our own time and context.

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## **Spiritual Practice**

Reflect on the most important things you believe. Write a short confession of your personal faith in five to seven sentences. Consider other things you believe that you left out. Think about ways these five to seven sentences influence your life. Resolve to keep your confession of faith in mind often.

## **Questions for Reflection**

What would be a practical way of teaching students in confirmation class about the Apostles' Creed as preparation for writing their own creeds to present to the session and perhaps the congregation?

Is there any "occasion" that could or should cause the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to prepare a new creed or confession?

If you were asked to name five doctrines, statements, or tenets that you believe are essential for your faith and that of the whole church, what would they be?