

Exploring the “Book of Confessions”

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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.¹

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. 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?