

Review of the Book of Confessions: Creeds and Confessions, Ancient and Modern

The *Book of Confessions* has two purposes for Presbyterian leaders. First, it helps us to interpret the Bible. We are not the first Christians to read and ponder the meaning of the Scripture for ourselves. The documents in the *Book of Confessions* provide insights into Scripture from the early days of the Christian era right up to the twentieth century.

We find differences in interpretation and application of the Bible by earlier readers in a variety of historical and cultural settings. What is amazing is the strong continuous thread that runs from 350 A.D. and the Apostle's Creed until today with Belhar. This shows that people have been reading the same Bible and finding in it the same story of humanity's life lived in relationship with Jesus Christ and our story of creation, life, fall, redemption and community. Despite differences in culture and context, the basic understanding of the biblical story remains the same.

The second purpose of the *Book of Confessions* is to summarize what we believe as Christians, Protestants and Reformed people. We are ecumenical, which means we are one part of the household of God. In other words, we are catholic, or universal, in our understanding of the faith. All Christians share two beliefs. One is the mystery of the Trinity. We believe in one God, known and demonstrated in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This God is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. The second belief we hold in common is that Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the eternal, life-giving Word of God. We are not alone. God came, in the flesh, to be with us in the person and reality of Jesus Christ so that we may have life with God and each other and learn how to live an authentic Christian life.

We are also Protestant or evangelical. We are inheritors of the Reformation, the sixteenth century renewal of the church based on a return to the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a movement initiated by Martin Luther, John Calvin and a host of reformers. Two key ideas were added to those of the ancient creeds: justification of faith by grace alone, through faith, and Scripture as the means and authority for salvation and the life of faith.

Finally, we belong to a subfamily of Protestants called Reformed. Six ideas or doctrines characterize our family. They are not unique to us as Presbyterian but they give us a sense of the priorities of our family of faith.

1. Sovereignty of God: God not only created but also sustains everything in the universe.
2. God elected, or chose, us for life and salvation and service to the world and to other women and men. This is the ground of our hope, for it means that even on our worst days, or in the midst of violence or tragedy, we cannot un-choose ourselves or set aside God's love for us.

3. God created a covenant with us that brings us into a family with one another. We belong together.
4. As members of this covenant family, we are called to be faithful stewards and advocates for all of creation.
5. Only God, shown to us in Jesus Christ, is worthy of our deepest commitments. Making anything more important than God is what the Bible calls idolatry.
6. In repentance, we must seek justice and live in deference to the Word of God.

These six concepts help us to know what Presbyterians believe and guide us forward into the future. Remember, these are great, general and uplifting concepts and are not the property of one group or another. The purpose of the creeds and confessions is education. They give us a chance to reflect on what is central and what is durable in faith and practice. This is our chance to think creatively about what it is to be faithful to God come to us in Jesus Christ.

Ancient Creeds

The Nicene Creed (4th century A.D.)

(See section 1.1-1.3 in the *Book of Confessions*)

The Nicene Creed was the first official doctrinal statement of the whole Christian church and the only creed accepted and used by all three major branches of Christendom: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant.

Read the Nicene Creed. Write your thought about the teachings on Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

The Apostles' Creed (second to eighth centuries A.D.)

(See section 2.1-2.3 in the *Book of Confessions*)

This is the most widely used confessional statement in the Western church. It is certainly the best known. The Sacrament of Baptism was the context from which the creed was further developed. It was probably in question-and-answer form originally.

Read the Apostles' Creed. Write your thoughts about the teachings on God in three persons and God as Creator of heaven and earth.

Reformation Confessions

The Scots Confession (1560)

(See section 3.01-3.25 in the *Book of Confessions*)

The first Reformed confession to be written in the English language, the Scots confession has been called the charter of the Church of Scotland. The Scottish parliament, at the conclusion of the civil war of 1560, invited John Knox and five colleagues to prepare a confession of faith for the church and the nation. They did their work in four days.

Read the Scots Confession. Write your thoughts about the teachings on election and the church.

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563)

(See section 4.001-4.129 in the *Book of Confessions*)

Of all the creeds and confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism has the most personal language and tone. A series of questions and answers, the catechism consists of three main sections. The first deals with sin and guilt (questions 3-11). The second and longest part discusses grace bestowed by God (questions 12-85). The final section deals with expressing gratitude to God, especially through prayer (questions 86-129).

In your copy of *The Book of Confessions*, scan the Heidelberg Catechism. Write your thoughts about the teachings of stewardship and the Lord's Supper.

The Second Helvetic Confession (1566)

(See section 5.001-5.260 in the *Book of Confessions*).

The Second Helvetic Confession is longer than the other Reformed creeds. It creates an ecumenical spirit. It has two major sections: the first on theology and the second on the church, ministry, and sacraments.

In your copy of *The Book of Confessions*, scan the Second Helvetic Confession. Write your thoughts about the teachings on covenant and baptism.

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647)

(See section 6.001-6.193 in the *Book of Confessions*).

The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms are the best known of the Reformation-era creeds among Presbyterians.

In your copy of the *Book of Confessions*, scan the Westminster Confession of Faith. Write your thoughts about the teachings on the sovereignty of God and the authority and interpretation of Scripture.

The Shorter Catechism (1647)

(See section 7.001-7.110 in the *Book of Confessions*).

The Shorter Catechism is perhaps the most famous Protestant catechism in the English language. It is a simple summary for young people of what is contained in the Larger Catechism, which its structure parallels. Questions 1 through 38 deal with what

Christians are to believe, while questions 39 through 107 are concerned with the duties of Christian life.

The Larger Catechism (1647)

(See section 7.111-7.306 in the *Book of Confessions*)

The Larger Catechism provides guidance for preachers in dealing with the doctrines stated in the confession.

Contemporary Declarations

The Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934)

(See section 8.01-8.28 in the *Book of Confessions*.)

The writers of the Theological Declaration of Barmen protested Nazi interference in church affairs and addressed errors of the Nazi-inspired “German Christian” movement. American Presbyterians modeled the Confession of 1967 on Barmen’s approach of clarifying faith in the face of issues in church and society. The basic questions were: Who if Lord: Jesus or Hitler? God or the state? What is the relation of the church to the state?

Read the Theological Declaration of Barmen. Write your thoughts about the teachings on the sin of idolatry and the Lordship of Christ.

The Confession of 1967

(See section 9.001-9.56 in the *Book of Confessions*).

The Confession of 1967 was the first Reformed statement to name and confirm social problems of its era: racial and sexual discrimination, discord among nations, and enslaving poverty. The three parts of the confession are 1) “God’s Work of Reconciliation” through the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit; 2) “The Ministry of reconciliation” encompasses “The Mission of the Church” (reconciliation in society) and “The Equipment of the Church” (preaching, teaching, and the sacraments); and 3) “The Fulfillment of Reconciliation” in the totality of human life in its environment and the culmination of God’s kingdom.

Read the Confession of 1967. Write your thoughts about C-67's teachings on reconciliation in church and society.

The Confession of Belhar – Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (1986)

(See section 10.1-10.9 in the *Book of Confessions*).

South Africa instituted Apartheid, a system of laws that separated people by race, from 1948-1994. The Dutch Reformed Church established racial separation and kept Christians from worshipping and coming to the Lord's Table together. The global church names apartheid a *status confessionis* – a conviction that the Gospel was at stake and in need of reclaiming. One outcome of the struggle was the Confession of Belhar in the early 1980s. Belhar's themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice issue a call from God to the whole church toward holy action, transformation and life.

Read the Confession of Belhar. Write your thoughts about Belhar's teachings on racial unity, reconciliation, and justice.

A Brief Statement of Faith – Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (1991)

(See section 11.1 – 11.6 in the *Book of Confessions*).

This confession is a result of reunion in 1983 of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the Presbyterian Church in the United States. In two pages. The statement confesses the faith of the church catholic (universal), Protestant, and Reformed.

Read A Brief Statement of Faith. Write your thoughts about the teachings on Jesus Christ's life and ministry, and human equality.
