

Creeds and Confessions

Matthew 7:21-23 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?'²³ Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'

Matthew 10:32-33 "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven;³³ but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

Romans 10:8-15 But what does it say? "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);⁹ because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.¹⁰ For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.¹¹ The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame."¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.¹³ For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."¹⁴ But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?¹⁵ And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

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If someone asked you to write down what you believed, could you do it? If you sat down to put on paper what your faith is all about, would you be able to express it, and how many pages would it take? Would you say the same things now that you would have said ten or twenty years ago? Has your understanding changed over time? Has your faith grown wider and deeper over the years? On the surface, this may not seem like too difficult a task. Just write down who you understand God to be. Maybe say something about church. Hit the print key. Did you think to say something about Jesus? How about the Holy Spirit? Do we need to include some thoughts about salvation - or forgiveness - or judgment - or creation - or resurrection? How about prayer? The Lord's Prayer? The Ten Commandments? Grace? Charity? Justice? Where does the list of topics stop?

And what would you call this document? When candidates seeking ordination as ministers do this, they call it a Statement of Faith and it's generally one or two pages long. But when churches do this, all sorts of terms have been used. If it's short, the term *creed* has often been applied. We speak of the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed. Longer documents have been called articles of faith, formulas, declarations of faith, statements of belief, and confessions. When we hear the word confession, our first thought is probably about admitting guilt - such as when a criminal confesses to committing a crime, or similarly, admitting our sins to God, or to each other. Confession is good for the soul, we say, and we're usually thinking about clearing the air by admitting our guilt and saying that we're sorry for what we've done.

But there's a completely different meaning for the word confession. It's more like a proclamation - a public declaration, taking a stand for what we believe is true. And that's the way that the term is used when we talk about creeds and confessions. That's the way Paul uses the term in today's passage from Romans. He says, "confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord" and in that phrase he uses the oldest confession in the Christian faith: *Jesus is Lord*. It was a radical and dangerous confession sometimes. In the synagogue, other Jews who didn't believe that Jesus was the Messiah would find the confession "Jesus is Lord" to be hard to hear, even blasphemous. In the street, the passing Roman soldier would hear "Jesus is Lord" as a treasonous statement, for everybody knew that Caesar was lord of all the empire, and the empire had room for only one supreme allegiance. But Paul says that our salvation is linked to our confession that Jesus is Lord.

We Presbyterians are a confessional church; that is, we've adopted confessions as official church documents. They're public proclamations of what we believe to be true. We aren't unusual in this. The Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Lutheran churches are also confessional bodies. To a lesser extent, so are Anglican, Episcopal, and Methodist churches. Even churches which declare that they have no creed but the Bible, have sometimes made semi-official confessions of faith. And the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds are formally, or informally, accepted by most Christian Churches.

A formal confession of faith can help disciples be clear on who they are, what they believe and what they resolve to do. Confessions aren't written in a vacuum. There's no schedule that says that we should write a new confession every century, or to celebrate some event. Confessions are always written when there's a need for one. Sometimes a confession was written to confront and correct some distortion of the truth and the claim of the gospel. Confessions were written in response to political or cultural movements that attacked the church. And sometimes the church felt that it had new insight into the promises and demands of the gospel that needed to be shared in an official confession of faith.

We make use confessions in various ways. The Nicene and Apostles' Creeds have long been used as part of the worship service in many churches. They've been acts of praise, thanksgiving, and commitment in the presence of God. I noticed when I arrived here that Benjamin had been using portions of other confessions in the worship service and I've continued that practice for two reasons. First, it provides the opportunity to become more familiar with other statements of faith that are recognized by the Presbyterian Church. Second, it often illustrates how the scripture, the sermon, and the portion of a confession all address the same issue.

The confessions also serve to provide a central core of thought for the church. Our ministers and church officers promise as part of their ordination to be instructed and led by the confessions. The confessions define to some degree how we of the reformed tradition understand scripture and how we relate to other Christians and the world at large. In these ways, the confessions seek to preserve the unity and purity of the church. The confessions in general, and some in particular, have been used as teaching instruments to instruct children and adult converts.

The Presbyterian Church in the USA has officially and formally adopted each of the documents found in The Book of Confessions. Each creed and confession is thus part of the Constitution of our church. Each one was written at a particular time and place - in response to a particular situation. This weekend we have been remembering and celebrating our declaration of independence from English rule. When changes of major importance take place, we humans tend to try to define these changes clearly and write them down for everyone to read and hear. Perhaps one way for us to have some glimmer of the excitement and the importance of our confessions is to think about how we absolutely had to write down this country's Declaration of Independence and our Constitution. Our two earliest creeds are a tiny bit like a declaration of independence from both Judaism and paganism. They are predominantly about how we worship one God, revealed to us in three ways, in three personhoods, and that sets us apart from both traditional Jewish understanding and the Greco-Roman pantheon of many, many gods. And just as our U.S. Constitution defines the basic framework of the beliefs that define us as a country and how we are organized, so too, the confessions were written during the reformation, written in the years of clarifying how we as Protestants were both Christians like our Roman Catholic siblings and yet distinctive in crucial ways. The confessions were written in exciting, turbulent, and often dangerous times!

These proclamations are the result of prayer, thought, and experience in specific moments in time. Therefore they contain wisdom - and at the same time, are limited by the thought processes and cultural influences of the time of their writing. So, they contain deep truth, yet despite all good intentions, they have also sometimes distorted the truth revealed in Jesus Christ. For Reformed Christians, all confessional statements have only a provisional, temporary, and relative authority. The Westminster Confession of 1646 says, "All synods or councils since the apostolic times. . . may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith and practice, but to be used as a help in both." As one of the mottos of the Reformation expressed it, we are "reformed and always reforming." We're always searching for better understanding of God's will. We're always wanting greater knowledge of God, and learning to love more completely and deeply. Since God's ways are not our ways, it follows

that we can only be on the path and make our journey toward God, but we can never arrive at full knowledge of God and perfection in our thoughts and deeds. To think that we have done so is the sin of pride written in large letters.

“Confessions are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ . . . as the Scriptures bear witness to him.” (Preface to the Confession of 1967) After several of the confessions are endnotes that list scriptures that relate to statements in the confession. Our confessions grow out of our understanding of scripture. We don’t write confessions and then look for Bible texts that support our statements. Now, let’s begin look at the documents in *The Book of Confessions*.

For almost three centuries, Christianity was in turmoil. It struggled with defining itself within its Jewish roots while at the same time trying to express the gospel in a Greco-Roman world. During this period Christianity became separated from the synagogue and Christians suffered through cycles of persecution by the Roman Empire. In the year 312, Constantine won control of the whole Roman Empire and declared that Christianity now had favored status in the realm. His motto was "One God, one Lord, one faith, one church, one empire, one emperor." We could spend several weeks studying why that seemed like such a blessing, but over time it became such a curse. Emperor Constantine sought unity in the church but discovered that there was great disagreement about who Christ was. The issue was whether Jesus Christ had always been an equal part of the God-head or was Jesus created at some point by God and was therefore a lesser form of divinity. Put another way, had the Trinity always existed as Triune equality, or was it a development at some point in time? Constantine called together a council of church leaders at Nicaea in 325 to try to resolve the issue. They met again in 381 in Constantinople and the resulting proclamation is our Nicene Creed.

We’re probably most familiar with The Apostles' Creed. The earliest versions are from the year 180. The church was confronted with the teachings of Marcion. He taught that the God of the Old Testament was a tyrannical God who created a flawed world. Jesus was not the Messiah proclaimed by the prophets, but a new good God of love and mercy. Marcion wanted to throw out the whole Old Testament and many parts of the New Testament that he thought were too Jewish. The Apostles' Creed is in Trinitarian form, with a paragraph devoted to each - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit - declaring that they are all God and all connected. Over the years, several phrases were added to The Apostles' Creed, dealing with other issues as they arose and the confession did not reach its present form until the eighth century.

While it took five centuries for the Apostles' Creed to be completed, so to speak, The Scots Confession was written in four days. In 1560, Scottish sovereignty was recognized by England. The Scottish Parliament declared Scotland to be a Protestant nation and asked the clergy to write a confession of faith that would define and declare the essence of Scottish Protestant faith. Six ministers, including John Knox, wrote the Scots Confession. In about fifteen pages, The Scots Confession deals not only with who we understand God to be, but human imperfection, the church, the authority of scripture, the sacraments, the relationship between government and church, and various doctrinal issues. Scripture is quoted frequently in the text. Parliament ratified The Scots Confession that same year.

Two years later, in 1562, there was great tension in Germany. Lutheran thought spread down the Neckar River while Reformed thought traveled up the Rhine River from Switzerland. They met at Heidelberg. Though the two movements had a great deal in common, they seemed to spend much of their energy disagreeing about the sacrament of communion. Frederick, the ruler of that region of Germany, asked two men, a professor and a preacher, to write a catechism that would be acceptable to both sides. A catechism is a confession written in question and answer form, designed to be a teaching tool that covers core beliefs of the faith for children and adults that are seeking to be full members of the church. In its twenty-one pages, The Heidelberg Catechism, in its peaceful tone, covers the Trinity, the phrases in the Apostles' Creed, the sacraments, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer.

Unfortunately, The Heidelberg Confession didn't have the desired effect and Lutherans accused Frederick of heresy. A Swiss minister, Heinrich Bullinger, had written a statement of faith that he intended to attach to his last will and testament as a gift to the church in Zurich, but he offered it to Frederick for his defense in his trial. Frederick was exonerated and Bullinger's statement of faith was

adopted all across Europe and came to be known as The Second Helvetic Confession, helvetic being the Latin word for Swiss. This confession freely quotes scripture passages and openly considers the teachings of earlier church leaders, both heretics and orthodox. It also speaks directly to differences with the structure and teachings of the Roman Catholic Church over its sixty-three pages.

Thus far, we have considered two very ancient confessions from the early centuries of the church and three confessions from the early decades of the Reformation. You may have noticed that they have become longer and longer, covering ever-wider issues. Next week we will pick up the topic with the huge project of the Westminster Standards and conclude this study of the creeds and confessions. Amen