

Creeds and Confessions - II

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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Last Sunday I challenged you to try to write your own personal statement of faith. I hope you did this. For many people, writing down their thoughts is a good way to really bring clarity to what they feel and believe.

We gave some thought to how the word *confession* not only refers to admitting our guilt, but another traditional meaning is that confession is publicly declaring what we hold to be true. In today's text from Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul says, "one confesses with the mouth and so is saved." Our salvation is linked to our confession that Jesus is Lord. Other points that we considered were that confessions have been written at various times in the church's history, always when there was a need to confront some distortion in the teaching of the church, or to respond to a threat from the political or cultural environment, or when the church felt it had a new and important insight to share. Many times in history, people were persecuted and even died as a result of their support for one of our confessions.

Confessions, then, were often written in very tense times. For this reason, they were carefully and prayerfully written, trying to express important truths with great wisdom. Therefore, we hold them in high regard. At the same time, they are subordinate standards. They are "subject to the authority of Jesus Christ . . . as the Scriptures bear witness to him." (Preface to the Confession of 1967) Each confession is a product of the issues and context of the time and place it was written. They're of great importance - and yet their authority is relative, provisional, and temporary. Life would be simpler if we thought that they were absolutely inerrant – or absolutely useless. But, holding them to be important, but not ultimate, means that we have to interpret them and think about them, and that's a bit more work.

Last week we considered how the Nicene Creed was written to declare that there was only one God and that Jesus wasn't some sort of Johnny-come-lately second-class deity. The Apostles' Creed began as a statement to address the same sort of issues, declaring God to be a three-in-one Trinity. Over about five centuries, other issues arose and phrases were added to the Apostles' Creed to address those issues. For instance, there was a great deal of argument about what to do about those people who had been faced with Roman persecution and had denied Christ to save their life or their family. It was at this point that the phrase, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins" was added. In the fourth and fifth centuries a major question was whether the church was exclusively made up of the pure and heroic few, or if it included all who confessed Jesus Christ. Rejecting the idea that the church was a society of the few saints, we declared it to be a school for sinners and we added the words *holy* and *catholic* to indicate that the church is universal and it belongs to God, not to us.

We looked at three confessions from the mid 1500s, the early years of the Reformation. These were longer confessions that tried to spell out how Protestants weren't heretics, because we held fast to core Christian

beliefs. At the same time, our confessions grew more and more specific in pointing out differences with the Roman Catholic Church.

About sixty years later, there was turmoil in England. The major issues were the liturgy and government of the Church of England, and so the English House of Commons called for an assembly to settle these issues. The House of Lords concurred, and so Parliament nominated 151 persons to assemble at Westminster Abby. Thirty of the people nominated were members of Parliament. The remainder were described as "learned, godly, and judicious divines." *Divines* is a term, which at that time, meant clergy. I shudder to think what sort of assembly we would have today, if members of the U.S. Congress chose thirty Representatives and Senators and selected 121 ministers, and told them to go write a series of documents to standardize and unify Christian belief and practice in the United States. It's a terrifying prospect that boggles the mind!

Circumstances were very different in those days. You may have noticed that the government, and the king (or other ruler), and religion were all intertwined. If the king was Roman Catholic, so was the country. If the ruler of a region was Lutheran, so was the province where he ruled. The church received funds from the government. In return, the church was supportive of the government and the head of state. Vestiges of that system remain in Europe and in many Moslem countries. The separation of church and state is still an anomaly in the eyes of much of the world's population.

So, England's Parliament convened an assembly to define and standardize the Protestant faith. Hoping that the standardization would be even more widely spread, they invited churches in Holland, Belgium, France, Scotland, Switzerland, and the American colonies to send delegates. Only Scotland sent delegates, five of them, and they had the right of discussion, but not vote. Over a period of six years, the assembly met 1,163 times. Sermons of one hour and prayers two hours in length were common. They produced five documents: *Form of Presbyterian Church Government, Directory of Public Worship, The Confession of Faith, The Larger Catechism, and the Shorter Catechism*. The English Parliament approved each one, as did the Scottish General Assembly. However, civil war had broken out in England, Cromwell came into power, the King was executed, and Presbyterians were thrown out of Parliament. As a result, the Westminster Standards were not applied in England, but the English-written standards were used in Scotland. "It is surely one of the ironies of history that Presbyterian Churches throughout the English-speaking world should hold as their standards a group of documents which were almost entirely the work of episcopally ordained clergymen of the Church of England."¹

In our Book of Confessions, we include the Westminster Confession, The Shorter Catechism, and the Longer Catechism which are 43 pages, 12 pages, and 34 pages, respectively. The Catechisms are in question and answer form and were intended to serve as a means of instructing children and adult converts in the faith. Both deal with questions about God, Christ, the Ten Commandments, the sacraments and the Lord's Prayer. Some of our senior members who grew up in the Presbyterian Church may have had to memorize part or all of the Shorter Catechism as they prepared for confirmation in their early teen years.

The Westminster Confession lists the approved books of the Bible and covers a great many details such as correct forms of prayer, lawful oaths, marriage and divorce, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and many other topics, all written in beautiful Elizabethan English. We don't use it much in worship because getting past the *converteth, translateth, justifieth, calleth*, and other word forms of that period might worketh confusion and distraction amongst the congregation -and tie the tongue of your pastor. There are some branches of the Reformed faith that treat the Westminster Confession as if it were almost scripture itself, and consider it to be infallible doctrine. But the Westminster Confession doesn't treat itself that highly, pointing out that synods and assemblies make mistakes in their declarations. Just as we shouldn't make an idol of the Bible, we most certainly must not make an idol of a confession.

The Westminster Confession is a monumental work, to be sure. However, it tends to be excessively legalistic, written with an over-confident pride that all issues were clear-cut with one right answer - which they had determined with complete certainty. For example, the Westminster Confession "predicts the issue of the final judgment with a confidence hardly befitting those who will be neither judge nor jury, but [the ones] judged."² Nonetheless, this confession has been widely accepted and used through the centuries. After modifying sections regarding the structure of church government, it was adopted by Congregationalists in 1648.

With additional changes to support adult believer's baptism, it became the basis for the Baptist Confession of 1742.³

The next document in our Book of Confessions was written three hundred years later, in 1934. The Theological Declaration of Barmen is an ecumenical confession, adopted by an assembly of representatives of Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches in Germany. The delegates included 139 ordained ministers, 53 church members, and 6 university professors. Perhaps the best-known delegates were Martin Niemoller⁴ and Karl Barth.

Remember our oldest confession? **Jesus is Lord.** The implications of that confession are what the Barmen Declaration is all about. In the early 1930s, there was a religious movement in Germany called the "German Christians." In cooperation with the Third Reich, they sought to form a German National Church, one that intertwined patriotism with faith, promoted ethnic purity in the church, and that removed all Jewish influence from the scriptures. The heresies of Marcion from the second century were repeated. In response, the assembly at Barmen made six statements, each beginning with scripture followed by a declaration of faith and then by a bold rejection of the idolatry that the German National Church had fallen into. Clearly and concisely, they reject idolatry of idea, person, institution, or purpose. Seventy-five years ago, on May 31, 1934, the Barmen Declaration was adopted unanimously. The delegates responded by singing the last stanza of "Now Thank We All Our God."⁵ Later, Albert Einstein would say, "Only the Church stood squarely across the path of Hitler's campaign for suppressing truth."⁶

In 1967, the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America adopted the first American-written Presbyterian confession. The times were turbulent and the committee charged with its writing had labored on the task for seven years. The entire confession is built around a single passage of scripture, "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself . . ." (2 Cor. 5:19, NRSV). It's only ten pages long, and those of us who lived through the fifties and sixties can hear clearly how this confession speaks to some of the social problems of that period, including racial discrimination, nationalistic arrogance, and family and class conflict. Recognizing the advancement of knowledge since the time of the writing of the Westminster Confession, it declares that the church has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding.

The final and most recent officially adopted confession is A Brief Statement of Faith, adopted in 1983, at the time of the reunion of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the Presbyterian Church in the United States. While it wasn't an entirely accurate description, many of us referred to them as the northern and southern Presbyterian churches. The Brief Statement of Faith sought to express a common Presbyterian identity. It's only two pages long, but the scriptural references take up six pages. While the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed move directly from Jesus' birth to his death, this statement emphasizes the importance of his ministry in Judea and Galilee. It also underscores the role of both men and women in God's covenant.

Our Confessions vary in length from eleven short lines to sixty-four pages. It took as little as an afternoon and as long as several centuries to write them. They were written by as few as one person to hundreds of people. Each was written to meet the needs of the time and place. It's been said that, "New occasions teach new duties: Time makes ancient good uncouth"⁷ The occasion of the rise of the German Christians in Nazi Germany taught new duties to the delegates at Barmen. Time has shown us that our ancient view of women was certainly worse than uncouth. There are contradictions between our confessions.⁸ That should not come as a surprise to those who see themselves as "Reformed, and always reforming."

We've considered the great wisdom and value of the study and thought that went into writing these confessions. There are weaknesses, as well. They dwell more on belief than on living out the belief. There is much about our obligation to God, and little about the second greatest commandment dealing with obligation to our neighbor. Much is said about individual morality, but little about being a just community. And given that we worship a God who is love, little is said about love.

Still, there is great strength and unity in these confessions, unity in proclaiming the Trinity, and that Jesus is truly human and truly divine and our Lord and Savior. Those that are Reformed confessions acknowledge the authority of scripture, emphasize God's sovereign claim on our life, and assume or state that the Holy Spirit is the source of all right interpretation of scripture. There is much deep wisdom in the confessions, written by a cloud of witnesses who gave great thought to their faith. We can do no less. Amen

¹ George S. Hendry, *The Westminster Confession for Today*, (Richmond, John Knox Press, 1960) p 10

² George S. Hendry, *The Westminster Confession for Today*, (Richmond, John Knox Press, 1960) p 15

³ Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds*, (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1985) p 140-141

⁴ "In Germany they came first for the communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a communist. Then they came for the Jews and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak up." - Martin Niemoeller "

⁵ "All praise and thanks to God the Father now be given; The Son and Him Who reigns with Them in highest Heaven; The one eternal God, whom earth and Heaven adore; For thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore."

⁶ "Only the Church stood squarely across the path of Hitler's campaign for suppressing truth. I never had any special interest in the Church before, but now I feel a great affection and admiration because the Church alone has had the courage and persistence to stand for intellectual truth and moral freedom. I am forced to confess that what I once despised I now praise unreservedly" - Albert Einstein, quoted by Jeffrey Myers, *Happy Birthday, Barmen!*, "The Presbyterian Outlook, May 18, 2009, page 10

⁷ George S. Hendry, *The Westminster Confession for Today*, (Richmond, John Knox Press, 1960) p 14, quoting James Russell Lowell in *The Present Crisis*

⁸ See the two texts from Matthew for this sermon.