

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Confessing ‘the’ faith

By Carmen Fowler

The Layman

As Americans, “we the people” is defined by a mutually agreed upon constitution. So too, as members of the Presbyterian Church (USA) we have a mutually agreed upon constitution that begins with the confession of what “we” believe. It’s called *The Book of Confessions*. The “we” of Presbyterianism is thus defined by those who believe what “we” believe. From basic Christianity to the finer points of Reformed theology, what do “we” believe?

“The faith once delivered to the saints”

contains an identifiable corpus of information. Paul describes it to the Christians at Corinth as something specific that he preached to them, which they received and upon which they stand:

“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared ...”¹

The Gospel and the faith have definable content. The questions we must ask and answer are what is the content of the faith and is that the same faith we confess today?

Not everyone who met Jesus believed He was the Christ. Not everyone was a follower of Jesus. Even some who followed for awhile turned away when His teaching became too hard to accept. Not everyone was a disciple of Christ “then” and not everyone is a disciple of Christ “now.” There were those who were “in” the Church and those who were not.

Read Acts 4:23-37 for a description of what the Church was like then. The line of differentiation had nothing to do with origin, lineage, skin color, age, gender, social status or level of education. The confession that Jesus was the Christ, the son of the living God, the Lord, sets Christians apart from the rest of humanity. They were a peculiar people, distinct from the dominant culture and considered a threat to the point of persecution and martyrdom.

As time passed, by God’s grace, the Spirit’s power and the disciples’ missionary efforts, the Church grew numerically, spread geographically and was admirably contextualized beyond a branch of Judaism. People who would have formerly described themselves as Jews, Greeks, Romans, Egyptians or people from the region across the Jordan, all became Christians. By confessing one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all,² this highly diverse people became one.

Over time, they sensed a need to clarify what it meant to be a Christian. Positively framed with the declaration “we believe,” the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed were not so much condemnations of those who do not believe what Christians believe, but instead provided necessary parameters for those who shared an

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identifiable set or system of beliefs, a people of particular faith. The creed expressed the nature of “we.”

Anyone who needed help defining what was and what was not a Christian, could simply examine the creed. It is as if they said: “If you too believe these things, then you are a part of us. If you do not believe these things, you may be many things, but you are apart from us.” This is not to say that Christians did not have fellowship with non-Christians, but that the two groups were understood to have distinct, mutually exclusive views of personal reality.

At various times over the course of the ensuing 20 centuries, the historic creeds and catechisms of Christendom have been amplified in systematic confessions of the faith. For Presbyterians, the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) was the sole standard for generations. The WCF expresses a system of belief that defined what it means to be Presbyterian. For most Presbyterians around the world, this remains the case.

However, following a denominational merger in 1958, the historic standard for American Presbyterians in the northern branch of what subsequently became the PCUSA in 1983, WCF, was edited and then supplemented by other confessional documents. This process yielded a *Book of Confessions* in 1965-67, replacing one clear confessional standard with a catalogue of eight. The Presbyterian Lay Committee was formed largely in opposition to this effort arguing that the more confessions we have the greater the likelihood of confusion among the laity as to what “we” believe, dilution of our core sense of identity and ultimate fracture of our unity.

The book was expanded again in 1989 with the addition of The Brief Statement of Faith and in the mid-1990’s there were failed attempts to add The French Confession of 1559. It is from this catalogue of confessions that those ordained in the PCUSA are asked to cull for themselves the essential tenets of the Reformed faith. It is to this book to which ministers, elders and deacons are to turn for guidance in the interpretation of the Scriptures as they prepare to teach and lead the people of God.

If you are an ordained officer in the PCUSA, you must now ask yourself, how well do I know the 11 documents already contained in *The Book of Confessions* and by what criteria will I evaluate whether an additional standard should be added? What, in fact, do I believe and upon what creeds and confessions am I relying as I lead the people of God? What is my creed and based on the content of that confession, am I a part of the people described as “we the people” of the PCUSA or have I departed from it?

For further study: *Theology Matters*,
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www.theologymatters.com

1. 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 NIV.

2. Ephesians 4:4-6 NIV.

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Week I: CREDO

The most basic Christian confession is expressed directly to Christ when a sinner comes to a saving knowledge of who Jesus is and what He has done, declaring with heartfelt gratitude, “my Lord and my God!”¹

John 1:1-14 might be considered the Gospel writer’s credo.

We might consider Paul’s credo to be summarized in Romans 1:1-5.

John the Baptist declared his faith in Jesus by shouting, “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”¹

A credo is something that defines your identity, governs your life, shapes your worldview, and for Christians, centers on the person and work of Jesus. For the self-centered humanist, a credo is about “me.” For the Christian, a credo is about Christ, in whom I am made new, to whose likeness I am being more thoroughly conformed day by day, and for whose glory I now live.

The truth of who Jesus is burns within those who have been with Him and compels them to speak with boldness even in the face of certain death.² A genuine credo cannot be contained. Like a fire in the belly, it is genuinely compelling and irrepressible. Following Peter’s testimony before the Sanhedrin in Acts 4, Peter and John are commanded not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. “But Peter and John replied, ‘Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God, for we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.’”³

What then is your credo?

Collectively, the followers of Jesus Christ in every generation redistribute the faith by sharing the Gospel of grace and truth with others. The Church, possessed of the Holy Spirit, must declare with boldness the reality of the incarnation, life, atoning sacrificial death, resurrection and promised return of Jesus even to an unbelieving world. Jesus so charged His disciples in issuing the Great Commission³ and Presbyterians mutually assent to that evangelistic calling in the first Great End of the Church⁴ of our constitution. We joyfully proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the salvation of those who do not yet know Him. That is our first and primary identity as a people.

For discussion:

1. What is the difference between the statements:
“Jesus Christ is my Lord,”
“Jesus Christ is Lord,”
“Jesus Christ is the Lord,” and
“Jesus is the Christ, the Lord alone?”
2. Which statement or statements are you most likely to make?
3. Which statements are actually Biblical?
4. Which statements accurately reflect what the confessions say?

¹ John 1:29 NIV.

² Acts 7.

³ Matthew 28:18-20.

⁴ Book of Order, Presbyterian Church (USA), G-1.0200

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Week II: CREED

Get out your *Book of Confessions* and determine the actual difference between the Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds.

The Nicene Creed was written in the fourth century in response to serious controversy within the Church. What was it that Arius believed that was so inconsistent with the faith once delivered to the saints that it rose to the level of heresy? What did he espouse that was anathema to the Church? At question was the nature of Jesus.¹

In Matthew 7:21 Jesus establishes that merely intellectual assent of His position as Lord is not sufficient. He declared that “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” So evidently, there are those who are in Christ, with Christ and for Christ, and those who are not. Even the demons acknowledged that Jesus was the son of God but they did not honor Him as Savior nor yield themselves to His Lordship.

Creeds are the means by which the Church has differentiated between beliefs that align with the Biblical revelation of who Christ is and those beliefs that emerge over time in the human imagination. Creeds draw the boundary lines of acceptable belief for those who would identify themselves as Christians.

Jesus drew the first line. Following Peter's initial confession of Christ as Lord, Jesus began explaining to the disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, suffer, die and on the third day rise again. But that did not align with Peter's ideas about the Messiah. Peter rebukes Jesus and Jesus in turn rebukes Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

Creeds are the means by which the Christian community draws the boundary lines of the faith. The first creeds are found in the Bible and center on the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is the content of the Gospel as professed by the first century Christians. Is it also the Gospel expressed by those who would claim the name of Jesus in 21st century American Presbyterianism?

For discussion:

1. Read Philippians 2:1-11. What does this passage declare about the nature and work of Jesus Christ? Do you so believe? If not, at what points does your faith depart from the faith expressed in Philippians 2? Upon what do you base your beliefs?
2. Read Colossians 1. What tenets of faith are expressed? Do you so believe? If not, at what points does your faith depart from the faith expressed in Colossians 1? Upon what authority do you base those beliefs?
3. Read the Apostles' Creed. What does the creed say about God the Father? God the Son? God the Holy Spirit? The nature of the Church? Do you so believe? If not, at what points does your faith depart from the faith expressed in the Apostles' Creed? Upon what authority do you base those beliefs?

¹ Williamson, Parker. *Standing Firm: Reclaiming Christian Faith in Times of Controversy*. Reformation Press, 1996. Call 1-800-360-0110 and we would be happy to send you a free copy of *Standing Firm*.

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Week III: CATECHISM

What is the chief end of man?

If you are over the age of 50 and grew up Presbyterian, something deep within you just answered automatically, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.” You can’t help yourself. The question itself triggered an answer memorized long ago. You have been conditioned through catechetical instruction to respond with a mutually agreed upon answer to the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. That is the power of a shared confessional standard taught to all who would aspire to be members of the Presbyterian church.

From the earliest days of the Church, new believers were instructed in “the faith” through the question and answer format of catechesis. Those under instruction were known as catechumens and the content of their discipleship was found in catechisms. The three classic parts of a catechism are the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostles’ Creed. New believers were examined for membership based not only on their ability to reproduce the right answers to the questions, but genuinely express an understanding of the content of the faith.

Our *Book of Confessions* contains three catechisms: Heidelberg (4.000-4.129), the Westminster Shorter (7.001-7.110) and the Westminster Larger (7.111-7.306). Reviewing the Heidelberg or Westminster Shorter Catechism is an excellent exercise for us as a means of refreshing our faith.¹

For discussion:

1. Make a list of the Ten Commandments. How do you understand each commandment and the positive duties they require (Westminster Shorter Catechism questions 39-87)? How are you “keeping” the commandments in your everyday life?
2. Jesus fulfilled the Law. Why then as Christians do we keep the commandments? Read Romans chapters 3-6 and discuss the various uses of the Law (to convict of sin, to satisfy the just requirements of God’s character, to lead lives pleasing to Him) and how we stand in relationship to the Law today.
3. Make a list of questions that you have about the Christian faith. See if those questions are addressed in the catechisms. If not, use the index in the back of *The Book of Confessions* and see if your concerns are addressed elsewhere.

¹ *Belonging to Christ* teaches young people and their parents basic Biblical truths for lifelong discipleship, using the Westminster Shorter Catechism. \$12.95 each, plus shipping. Call 800-368-0110 to order.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Carmen Fowler is the author of the equipping section that appears in the center of each issue of *The Layman*. Your feedback is greatly appreciated as future studies are planned.

Share your comments with Carmen via e-mail at cfowler@layman.org,
call 1-800-368-0110 or write her at P.O. 2210, Lenoir, NC 28645.

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Week IV: CONFESSION

Confession is a two-sided coin. On the one side is the confession of our sinfulness and our deep personal need for redemption. On the other side is the joyful confession that God has met that need in and through the finished saving work of His Son, Jesus the Christ. Confessing our sin against the holiness of God without the saving knowledge of Jesus leaves us in hopeless desperation. The personal confession of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord brings not only relief from the consequences of sin and death, but a genuine moment-by-moment joy in newness of life lived in the reality of abundant grace and eternal truth.

The Church was born in confession as Peter declared of Jesus, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus affirmed Peter’s confession and declared that upon that confession of faith, He would build His Church. Confession then, whether personal or corporate, necessarily confesses Christ and focuses on the good news of what God has done in Him. The first test of any Confession is its clear and unconditional declaration that Jesus Christ is Lord.

The second test, although applying the faith once delivered in a particular historical context, is how closely the new confession echoes the tenets of the faith once delivered to the saints and the historical confessions of Christ’s disciples over the centuries.

The third question is whether or not it is urgently needed in order for the people who now confess the historic faith to do so in a fresh voice in order to both define a distinctively Christian people in the context of the larger population and reach a new generation with the Gospel. As we consider expanding the confessional corpus to include an additional confession, we must ask these three essential questions. If, at any point, a statement fails to meet this minimum threshold, it must be declined.

When ministers become members of presbytery and when elders become active on session, they are asked to make a statement of their faith. As you listen to and read those statements, consider if there are points of departure from our mutually agreed upon Confessional standards. Then consider your responsibility to the integrity of the body to inquire about those departures.

For discussion:

1. II Corinthians 4:13 reminds us that “just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with the Scripture – ‘I believed, and so I spoke’ – we also believe, and so we speak ...” Write a one page statement of what you believe and are compelled to share by faith with others.
2. Now evaluate your personal confession with the historic standards of belief contained in the *Book of Confessions*. Are there points of departure? Are they significant?
3. Use this same methodology in evaluating whether or not the Belhar Confession should be included in *The Book of Confessions*: In what ways is the Belhar Confession “in accordance with the Scripture” and where does it depart? Does it communicate the faith once delivered to the saints in such a way, addressing such an urgent need in our common life, that we are compelled by our belief to so speak? Why add the Belhar to the PCUSA constitution and not more generally to the larger collection of Reformed confessions?¹

For further study:

“Is This the Faith that We Confess? A briefing paper by Presbyterian Action on the Belhar Confession,” by Alan Wisdom www.TheIRD.org. (See page 10)

The Foundation for Reformed Theology analysis of The Belhar Confession posted at www.layman.org/voterresource (listed in the Belhar Confession section.)

¹ James Goodloe IV of The Foundation for Reformed Theology suggests that instead of including the Belhar in our constitution, we consider adding it to a comprehensive collection like John Leith’s *Creeds of the Church: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present* (1982, John Knox Press.), now in its third edition. Goodloe comments, “There is a difference between a collection and a constitution. A collection should be comprehensive. A constitution must be coherent.”