



*Considering
the Confessions*

ECO is committed to growing and planting flourishing churches that make disciples of Jesus Christ.

The Purpose and Function of the Theological Task Force

October 2016

When ECO was in its infancy, there was considerable discussion about the nature of the confessions within ECO. There were many views about what should be included and what should not be included in our confessional standards. After considerable and prayerful discussion, there was consensus on the following:

- Presbyteries and congregations should engage in substantive theological reflection in order to rediscover the significance of what it means to be a confessional church.
- The essential tenets allow for a clear and shared understanding so that the environment could be created where we could wrestle with the confessional questions.

ECO has adopted the confessions that had been in the PC(USA) Book of Confessions at the time of our inception. As the PC(USA) makes changes to its Book of Confessions, those newly adopted confessions are not applicable to ECO. While ECO has the essential tenets, the confessions still have weight and validity in ECO. Here is what the essential tenets say about the confessions:

Essential tenets are tied to the teaching of the confessions as reliable expositions of Scripture. The essential tenets call out for explication, not as another confession, but as indispensable indicators of confessional convictions about what Scripture leads us to believe and do. Essential tenets do not replace the confessions, but rather witness to the confessions' common core.

The Theological Task Force has been hard at work creating the environment where ECO as a whole can have constructive and informed dialogue about the nature of the confessions. The task force asks that both presbyteries and congregations engage in recommendations regarding the removal, addition, or alteration of the confessions.

The task force has developed brief introductory summaries of each confession. These summaries include perceived strengths and weaknesses of the confession, areas where the confession is silent, and ways in which the confession speaks to the essential tenets, as well as areas of the essentials that may not be supported if the confession is lost. These summaries are attached.

In order to assist with the discussion on Confessional Standards, the following documents are included:

- | | |
|--|---------|
| 1. Introductions to our current confessions | page 1 |
| 2. Checklist of theological issues which are featured in the confessions | page 15 |
| 3. Examples of questions to be asked of a confession | page 20 |
| 4. Subscription chart | page 21 |

At our national meeting in January 2016, the Theological Task Force will present the historic ways in which confessions have been viewed, along with the way in which our polity currently views the confessions as they relate to the essential tenets. This presentation and follow-up breakouts will allow commissioners to go back to their presbyteries and make overtures to the later assemblies about modifications to our confessional standards.

Thank you for your prayerful support of the work of the Theological Task Force. We look forward to future discussions which will fuel the movement to which God has called us.

In Christ,

Rev. Dr. Richard Gibbons

Chair, Theological Task Force

Introduction to the Confessions

The Nicene Creed & The Apostles' Creed

The Patristic Period

The essential doctrines of the Christian faith were given form in the period running from the close of the New Testament writings (ca. 100) to the Council of Chalcedon in 451—the Patristic Period. The first half of this period was occupied with defining what it meant to be the church, staying faithful to its mission and doctrine in the midst of a hostile culture. With the conversion of the Emperor Constantine (between 312 and 337) and the end of large scale persecution, the church began to turn its attention to theological issues that had been percolating through the years. The next two hundred years brought about some of the most brilliant, creative, and discerning theological work in the history of the church defining the essential doctrines of the Christian faith.

Through deliberation and debate, councils and creeds, heretics and heroes, the church came to define what it believed to be essential for the whole church to hold true. It was during the Patristic period that the church defined the triune nature of God, the two natures of Jesus Christ, the doctrine of salvation by grace, and the nature of the church not only as essential doctrines but also as foundational standards of faith and practice.

The Patristic Period produced many important creedal statements. In addition to a number of Ecumenical Councils—each producing a statement of faith in the form of a creed—numerous individuals wrote creeds expressing the faith and doctrine of the church. The current *Book of Confessions* contains two creeds from this period: *The Nicene Creed* and *The Apostles' Creed*. While both are succinct documents, they are the result of protracted struggles and profound discernment, and thus provide the church with ingenious expressions of deep theological mysteries.

The Nicene Creed

Sometimes called the “Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed,” this expression of the Christian faith is the product of a century of heated debate. At the end of three hundred years of oppression and widespread persecution, a great turn came when the Roman Emperor Constantine declared the Christian faith legal for the first time by the Edict of Milan in AD 313. As Roman Emperors had done in the past with conquered peoples, he convened a council of representatives from every major city in the empire to settle internecine disputes. Constantine was beginning to describe himself as a Christian, and his mother, Helen, had become a devoted believer. In 325, the council was convened in Nicaea, just outside of Constantinople. The Emperor himself presided, welcoming bishops, theologians, and representatives from across the known world.

One of the primary issues was the teaching of Arius, a presbyter from Alexandria. In an effort to defend Christianity as a monotheistic religion, Arius had presented a rational exposition of the Trinity as a chain of divine beings with the Father alone at the very top, and the Son and Spirit following along behind—lesser divinities, but still divine. His bishop, Alexander, a deacon named Athanasius, and many others felt that this posture diminished the Son and Spirit. While attempting

to be rational, Arius' teaching abandoned the full confession that Jesus is the eternal God, no less than the Father. There was no time nor ontological category in which the Father's existence preceded the Son's. The primary work of the Nicene Creed in its first form (325) was to explain the equal divinity of the Father and the Son, one in divine essence and being.

The close of the Council of Nicaea was only the opening of the debate, which raged on through the fourth century. By the time a council was gathered in Constantinople in 381, the church was ready, not only to defend the equality of the divine being of the Son, but of the Spirit as well. The creed we now share is the product of these two councils, and represents the core Christian belief in the doctrine of the Trinity, revealed and beyond human rationality.

This creed represents the core doctrine of God for all Christians. God is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God in three Persons, equally divine and of the same substance. They are equally revered, worshiped and adored. The century of heated debate created a united statement on the nature of God and the meaning of the incarnation, uniting the church in faith and understanding. This creed unites Christians from Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and many Protestant traditions, though not without disagreement on the *filioque* clause (that the Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as the Father).

The Apostles' Creed

In one of the earliest descriptions of a Christian baptism written around 150 AD, Justin Martyr wrote, "they are brought by us where there is water, and are born again in the same manner of rebirth by which we ourselves were born again, for they then receive washing in water in the name of God the Father and Master of all, and of our Savior, Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit... And we have learned from the Apostles this reason for this rite" (*First Apology* 61). The Apostles' Creed is one of the earliest full expressions of the Christian faith, and most likely emerged as a baptismal liturgy. The initiate would be asked: "Do you believe in the Father? Do you believe in the Son? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?" and would respond with answers to each. These answers were eventually codified into the "Old Roman Creed" by the end of the second century. The "Old Roman Creed" saw elaboration over the years, eventually becoming the Apostles' Creed in later centuries.

Tradition ascribing the words and phrases of this creed to each of the twelve apostles directly has been discounted, but the creed as it stands is a clear articulation of the Christian faith sourced in the earliest liturgies and confessional experiences of the Christian church. No distinct date can be offered for its initial composition, but it attained its current form by the eighth century. This creed is not the product of an ecumenical council or specific event. It emerged out of the faith and practice of the early church. There is no doubt that the Apostles' Creed is a proper summary of the apostolic deposit of faith and it remains the most basic and complete expression of Christianity, recognized in almost every church that calls itself Christian.

Trinitarian in outline, the creed asserts the divinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in Whom the Christian places his or her trust and belief. Some traditions break the creed down into twelve articles of faith, but the Trinitarian form should be upheld in outline however the remainder of the creed is taught. Our ultimate faith and trust is "in" God—so we "believe in" the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The remaining material describes the life and activity of God. Nonetheless,

failure to believe in the life and activity of God in any of the subsidiary claims is failure to fully profess the Christian faith. This creed asserts, for example, that failure to believe in the virgin birth is falling short of full trust and faith placed in “Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord.”

The “catholic church” is not the name of a particular denomination or branch of Christianity, but denotes the church universal gathered in all places and all times by the power of the Holy Spirit. The descent of Jesus Christ “into hell” refers to the death of Christ, and not necessarily to traditions concerning the mission of Jesus to the damned (the so-called “harrowing of hell” traditions).

Importance of the Patristic Creeds

The creeds of the Patristic Period are vitally important for the contemporary church for several reasons. First, they provide a clear and succinct articulation of the essential elements of the Christian faith as discerned by the church in its first centuries. The creeds of the Patristic Period unite the modern church to its ancient foundational standards, connecting the church today with the church at its birth. Second, these creeds extend beyond sect and denomination to unite the entire Christian church around essential articles of faith and doctrine that lie at the heart of the Christian belief. These creeds provide a unity of faith transcending denominations, sects, and traditions.

In establishing and adopting these creeds, the church bears witness to a reality and authority that exists over its faith and life. The truths of the faith determine the faith and life of the church and not the other way around. Thus Patristic Creeds, in their witness of God’s nature, saving work, and existence of the church, testify not only as brief and brilliant articulations of the details of what the church believes, but as a declaration that its message, life, and mission are entirely shaped by these realities.

The Scots Confession of 1560

The Scots Confession was received and ratified by the Scottish Reformation Parliament in August 1560. The Confession became the chief subordinate standard of the Church of Scotland until superseded, but not annulled, by the Westminster Confession in 1647.

The Scots Confession is perhaps best known for its focus on the marks of the true church, “the true preaching of the Word of God,” “the right administration of the sacraments,” and the “ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered.” There is, however, a great deal more to the Confession than the memorable and insightful marks of the true church.

The distinctive nature of Reformation theology first birthed in continental Europe is displayed in the Confession’s 25 articles and reflects the Calvinistic theology of Geneva and Zürich, rather than the emphasis of Luther at Wittenberg. Its chapters deal with a myriad of diverse theological concerns and demonstrate the heart of Reformed theology in the opening chapter by intentionally focusing on he who “is eternal, infinite, immeasurable, incomprehensible, omnipotent, invisible; one in substance and yet distinct in three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.” The remaining articles focus on humanity as integral to the created order, the nature of original sin and God’s covenant promises, God’s preservation of the Kirk (church), and the incarnation, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. A close reading of the Confession also reveals its emphasis on the immutable decrees of God reflected in the doctrine of election, the depravity of humanity, and the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. The function of the Law and good works are also highlighted; along with the immortality of the soul, the authority of the scriptures, the sacraments, and the place of councils and civil magistrates. The Confession concludes by underlining the gifts given to the believer through union with Christ.

The historical and political context of the Confession reminds us that in the previous 40 years, the Kirk in Scotland had been impacted by the distribution of Tyndale’s New Testament, internal calls for church reform, the death of a significant number of protestant martyrs, Luther’s writing on justification by faith alone, and the rise of a protestant nobility reflected in the ascendancy and centrality of John Knox and The Lords of the Congregation. Scotland’s relationship with England and France, and the roles of Mary of Guise and her daughter, Mary Queen of Scots, also shade the historical context for the Scots Confession.

“The *Scots Confession* takes a place of honor among the influential documents of Protestantism. It is a lively and warm document, thoroughly biblical in its phraseology and expressing clearly Calvinistic theology which impressively emphasizes the centrality of the Lord Jesus Christ” (R. Tudor Jones, *The Great Reformation*, IVP: Leicester, 1985). It is all the more impressive given that it was written by six ministers over a four-day period.

The Heidelberg Catechism

In the Holy Roman Empire of the 1500s Heidelberg, the home of Heidelberg University, was the most influential city in what is now modern Germany. In the 1520s some of the university's reform-minded faculty began calling for church reform. Frederick II, Elector Palatine, embraced and endorsed this new movement against the desires of Emperor Charles V, who in 1548 enacted the Augsburg Interim, which tried to force all territories to adhere to the practices of the Holy Roman Church. The Protestant churches so strongly resisted this interdict that in 1555 the Peace of Augsburg was decreed, allowing each local prince to decide the religious direction of his own region.

In 1556, Otto Henry, Elector Palatine, realized that the Protestant pastors were inadequately trained and depended more on superstitions and traditions than on the truths of Scripture, resulting in congregations that were spiritually deficient. He undertook means to remedy this situation. At his death in 1559, his nephew, Frederick III, the new Elector, continued his work.

In 1563, Frederick III and a team of 15 theologians, church superintendents, and lay leaders published the Heidelberg Catechism as a teaching tool and a form of confessional unity among the churches. Frederick III prefaced this publication, stating his particular concern for the younger generation's spiritual development:

Therefore, we also have ascertained, that, by no means the least defect of our system, is found in the fact that our blooming youth is disposed to be careless in respect to Christian doctrine... The consequence has ensued that they have, in too many instances, grown up without the fear of God and the knowledge of his Word.

The Heidelberg Catechism was designed to be a document for laying a biblical foundation in the life of God's people through individual study, preaching the foundations of the faith, and to be a tool for devotional reading as well. From the very first question, it points us to Jesus Christ as our only hope in life and in death. Its teachings help to keep our hearts and minds focused on the importance of being faithful to many essential tenets of God's Word.

It is comprised of 129 questions, arranged in 52 groups—one for each Sunday of the year; discussing our hope in Christ alone (through grace alone, by faith alone), the Apostles' Creed, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, the nature of spiritual conversion, and giving us a basic understanding of the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer.

The Heidelberg Catechism is especially helpful to us in making sure that the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ are fully understood through its exposition of the Apostles' Creed. The concise explanations of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper commend themselves as a basic reference to what the sacraments are all about.

The section on the Ten Commandments shows us the usefulness of the law and how it helps us to live our lives in obedience to God, while not being a slave to the letter of the law. And the section on the Lord's Prayer reminds us of the importance of prayer in our daily lives, as well as expanding on the model Christ gave us for effective personal and corporate prayer.

The Second Helvetic Confession

The Second Helvetic Confession stands alone within the Book of Confessions as an expression of the Reformation of Switzerland. Written by Heinrich Bullinger in 1562 as a statement of faith intended to be attached to his will, it has the character of a personal testimony. After being used by Frederick III, the Elector of the Palatinate, in 1565 in his defense against charges of heresy, however, the Second Helvetic Confession was soon adopted by the Swiss cantons in 1566 as a catholic and Reformed statement of beliefs. The Reformed churches of Scotland (1566), Hungary (1567), France (1571), and Poland (1578) also subsequently adopted it.

The chapters of the Second Helvetic Confession prefigure the traditional ordering of doctrines in many of our Reformed confessions: Holy Scripture and its interpretation (ch. 1-2), doctrines of God, His intentions for right worship, and His providence, including admonitions against idolatry (ch. 3-6), creation (ch. 7), humankind, sin, and free will (ch. 8-9), predestination (ch. 10), Jesus the mediator (ch. 11), God's law and its completion in Christ (ch. 12), the Gospel of Jesus Christ (ch. 13), repentance and conversion (ch. 14), justification (ch. 15), good works as proceeding from faith (ch. 16), the church and its ministers (ch. 17-18), the sacraments (ch. 19-21), worship (ch. 22-24), religious instruction and ministry to the sick and dying (ch. 25-26), church ceremonies (ch. 27), church property (ch. 28), marriage (ch. 29), civil engagement and the justifiability of warfare (ch. 30).

The ordering of its chapters points to several key features of the Second Helvetic Confession. It is noteworthy that the doctrine of predestination is placed after an explication of human sinfulness and prior to a declaration of salvation in Jesus Christ. In this way, the doctrine of predestination is offered as the bridge between humanity and God. While Bullinger had previously expressed reservations about John Calvin's double predestination, he is careful in the Second Helvetic Confession to avoid any appearance of dissension. Predestination is only described in terms of election; no reprobation is ever mentioned. Thus, the confession articulates a common ground for Reformed Christians to faithfully declare that salvation belongs to God's grace alone.

It is also worth noting the number of chapters devoted to doctrines of the church and the practice of ministry. Nearly half of the Second Helvetic Confession is devoted to the life of faith as lived in Christian community. Bullinger again mediates some of the tensions within the early Reformed church, specifically varying understandings of the sacraments. The sacraments are understood as signifying symbols of grace as well as our means of sacramental union with Christ. The Second Helvetic Confession provides us some of our strongest statements on the appropriateness of infant baptism and the rejection of re-baptism.

Finally, a unique feature of the Second Helvetic Confession is its very useful instructions on the interpretation of Scripture. Specifically, believers are directed to first interpret Scripture from Scripture, but to embrace the study of language and historical context, so long as such study results in understandings that "agree with the rule of faith and love" and contribute "much to the glory of God and man's salvation."

**The Westminster Standards:
The Westminster Confession of Faith
The Westminster Shorter Catechism
The Westminster Longer Catechism**

The Westminster Confession and Catechisms have been the most influential theological documents in the history of American Presbyterianism. They served for over two centuries as the confessional standard of the main presbyterian bodies in America and continue to do so today for several presbyterian denominations.

The Confession and Catechisms were initially forged by the Westminster Assembly (1643-1652) as the central documents and doctrinal core of the Westminster Standards (a phrase that sometimes includes two additional creations of the Assembly, namely the Directory of Public Worship and the Form of Church Government). Since that time, the Confession and Catechisms have played a foundational role in defining the English-speaking stream of the Reformed theological tradition.

In 1729 the Confession and Catechisms became the formal confession of faith of American Presbyterians when they were adopted by the Synod of Philadelphia. Despite the complex history of Presbyterian splits and reunions, they remained the doctrinal standard of the major Presbyterian denominations in America until the UPCUSA (or “northern Presbyterian Church”) embraced a new understanding of the role of confessions with the adoption of a Book of Confessions in 1967. The PCUS (or “southern Presbyterian Church”) continued to hold the Westminster Confession and Catechisms as its confessional standard until it merged with the UPCUSA to form the PC(USA) in 1983.

The theology of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms reflects the characteristic emphases of the Reformed Tradition, including the authority of Scripture as the Word of God, and the glory and sovereignty of God in creation and redemption. The primary distinctive teaching of the Westminster Standards, relative to other Reformed confessions, can be found in its covenant theology, which features a two-covenant schema for understanding God’s relationship to humanity: a “covenant of works” (prior to humanity’s fall into sin) and a “covenant of grace” through Christ, which spans the history of salvation in both the Old and New Testaments.

The Westminster Confession and Catechisms provide the organizing theme or central thread of the Essential Tenets of ECO, as reflected in the opening statement of the Essential Tenets (following the preamble), which quotes the Westminster Shorter Catechism: “The great purpose toward which each human life is drawn is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.” (The first question of the catechism, “What is the chief end of man?” is answered: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.”)

The text of the Confession and Catechisms as found in the Book of Confessions reflects various amendments made in the course of American Presbyterian history. The three most significant amendments to the Confession are the revisions of 1788 concerning the civil government’s relationship to the church; the amendments of 1903, which included the addition of new chapters on the Holy Spirit and Missions; and the 1958 replacement of chapter 24 with a new statement on marriage and divorce.

The Theological Declaration of Barmen

The *Theological Declaration of Barmen* is unique in the *Book of Confessions* as a declaration about a specific issue that stands to unite the church against a mortal heresy. It purposefully avoided being a confession in order to unite disparate confessional traditions. As such, *Barmen* adds no new doctrine to the Reformed tradition, but declares a perspective of supreme importance on the relationship of the church to the Word of God, and to the state in a time of crisis.

History

Germany, 1933: a growing nationalism based in ideology of *Volk*, and *blood and soil*, had worked its way into the life of the churches of Germany. A new movement, the “German Christians,” arose, filled with religious zeal, to unite and revitalize the churches of Germany with this newfound spirit. “German Christians” succumbed to the temptation that faces all Christians in all times, of seeking to use Jesus Christ to justify the world as the world. When Hitler was made chancellor of Germany and his power sealed, a series of bold maneuvers led to the unification of German churches under the power of the “German Christians,” who had earlier called for the purity of their race as part of God’s established natural orders. When the Nazi party produced the *Aryan Paragraph*, forcibly retiring all Jews from civil service and precluding their future involvement, “German Christians” were happy to apply this to church membership.

The growing clarity of the unbiblical beliefs and bullying tactics of this group produced a crisis in German churches which culminated in April 22, 1934, where a meeting of pastors in Ulm created the “Confessing Church,” which claimed to alone be the true Protestant Church of Germany, against those controlled by the “German Christians.” This meeting commissioned a confessional synod, which met in Barmen May 29-31, 1934.

Karl Barth and three other delegates wrote the *Theological Declaration of Barmen*, unanimously accepted by 138 delegates of Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches. *Barmen* was not a direct attack on Nazism or Hitler, but sought to address the heart of the matter—false teaching in the church.

Content

Barmen contains two main sections: 1) The purpose of the *Declaration* in uniting the church in obedience to the Word of God by the power of the Holy Spirit rather than in submission to “false doctrine, force, and insincere practices”; 2) Six theses that use Scripture to establish a positive doctrine and the basis by which false doctrines of the “German Christians” are rejected.

Barmen’s six theses in sum are:

1. *Sola Scriptura*: “Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as attested in Holy Scripture” is the sole basis of our trustworthy revelation of God.
2. *Solus Christus*: Christ is lord of all areas of life, and no other lord can offer justification or sanctification.
3. Christ is our only source of unity and the church is solely his property. The church must never change the form of its message or polity to fit an ideology.
4. Positions of authority in the church are not positions of lordship, but of ministry.

5. Although the state is established by God, this is only for the provision of justice and peace, and the state should not expand its dominion to encompass the function of the church. Nor should the church become an organ of the state.
6. The message of free grace in Christ must be extended to all people. It cannot be, as the “German Christians” desired, withheld from Jews, or from anyone else. The grace of God is both a consolation to a church under affliction (Matthew 28:20) and the guarantor of the church’s freedom (2 Timothy 2:9).

Significance

Barmen declared that the church stood unified against false teachings that were destroying the peace, unity, and purity of the church in Germany. It exemplified the prophetic role of the church. Rather than aggressive, political wrangling, the church trusted in its lord, Jesus Christ, alone. As we enter a significantly different period of Western history in which Christianity is not privileged or equated with a specific culture, Post-Christendom, our churches will increasingly face situations similar to that of the Confessing Church. Will we be prepared to boldly declare the total lordship of Christ, rooted only in his revelation in Scripture, though it may cost us everything? *Barmen* asks us today, “In what ways is the church tempted to justify the world?”

Should Barmen be Included?

The inclusion of *Barmen* is a unique issue, as it is a different genre to the Patristic Creeds and the Reformed Confessions of the rest of the current *Book of Confessions*. *Barmen* highlights the vital importance, and political consequences, of declaring that every part of human life falls under the lordship of Christ. *Barmen* stands as the basis of renouncing the idolatry of self-created identities: nation, politics, gender, sexuality, race, family. *Barmen* also highlights the problem of natural theology through natural law and natural revelation. Though this is more of a Barthian influence and may not reflect the broadest Reformed tradition, the “German Christians” use of natural theology arguments (*Volk*, blood and soil, nation) for their evil purposes reveals the constant temptation to project our perspective onto nature and so receive unassailable self-justification. *Barmen* boldly declares that Christ alone is the one truth by which all else must be measured. It further clarifies the relationship between church and state. *Barmen* is a helpful balance to the confessions that are a product of Christendom.

The Confession of 1967

Introduction

In 1957, the General Assembly was asked to provide an updated, contemporary language, version of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. The General Assembly affirmed the idea and created The Special Committee for a Brief Statement of Faith. Despite its mandate, the committee quickly concluded they would not revise the shorter Catechism but would instead create a new, brief confession. This was not intended to replace the Westminster Standards, but to become with them and other confessions a multi-faceted expression of the church's faith.

A number of issues were influential in bringing the committee to this point. The first issue was the perspective that every creed and confession was a statement of its time and that in each time the church must confess its faith afresh. The second was a critical view of Scripture that recognized historical and cultural influences upon the biblical writings bringing a different understanding of inspiration than traditionally expressed. The third was a theological renaissance that had brought fresh and dynamic expressions of the Reformed tradition. And the final issue was the growing belief that the church needed to address the profound social issues rising in the culture around it. The Westminster Standards, while respected, were seen as dated, harsh, and silent to contemporary issues. These convinced the committee that the church needed both a contemporary confession and a collection of confessions to appropriately express its faith.

The Special Committee brought its report to the General Assembly in 1965. After rigorous debate across the church, a large majority affirmed its essential recommendations creating *The Book of Confessions* and making C67 its most contemporary expression of faith.

Theme and Content

The pervading theme of C67 is the doctrine of reconciliation, which the committee chair described as “almost identical with the doctrine of justification at the time of the Reformation.” After a preface, the confession moves through three main parts. The first, titled “God’s Work of Reconciliation,” describes the person and work of Jesus and God’s reconciling work to restore a lost humanity to himself. This section ends with a discussion of the Holy Spirit, the new life of reconciliation, and the role and place of Scripture. The second part concerns “The Ministry of Reconciliation,” which describes the life, order, and mission of the church. A large part of this section deals with the church being an agent of reconciliation in the world. A brief final section titled “The Fulfillment of Reconciliation” speaks of the ultimate fulfillment of the rule of Christ.

Controversies and Contributions

Several points of controversy have stood out through the creation, adoption, and use of C67. From the very start, conservatives believed that C67 diminished the authority of Scripture. Unlike Westminster which begins with the church’s understanding of the Bible, C67 places the Bible in the third section under the Holy Spirit. With its emphasis on Jesus as “the one sufficient revelation of God,” and its declaration that Scripture were “words of men” conditioned by their historical setting, it convinced many that C67 depreciated the authority and inspiration of the Bible and overemphasized the role of human interpretation.

Similarly, the creeds and confessions also came to be seen more as statements of faith in specific times and contexts than expressions of eternal truths. As no creed or confession was perfect or capable of expressing all the church might hold true, fresh expressions were seen as necessary. The role and authority of the Westminster Standards were thus reduced and ordination questions were changed to reflect the new perspective.

The confession rejects Westminster's doctrine of limited atonement, holding the "risen Christ is the savior of all" people. This, coupled with ethical calls to respect other religions and recognition that all religions, including the Christian, possess a "human character," de-emphasizes the divine nature of the Christian faith and is viewed as promoting relativism and universalism.

However, the confession boldly and clearly addresses modern issues, calling for Christians to live lives that model the reconciliation they have been given. It alone in *The Book of Confessions* addresses such ethical issues as employment, housing, education, racial discrimination, and political rights. The confession makes no distinction between men and women, declaring that the Spirit endows all members of the church with gifts for ministry.

A Brief Statement of Faith

Presbyterian Church (USA)

Commissioned at the formation of the PC(USA) in 1983 with the merging of the UPCUSA and PCUS, “A Brief Statement of Faith” was intended to be a concise summary of the Reformed tradition that could be used in worship settings. This document was not intended to be used alone, but to be included within the *Book of Confessions*. It attempts to remedy some of the weaknesses of earlier documents in light of more modern concerns. It alone acknowledges that election is for the blessing of all nations and not just salvation. It alone affirms the place of women alongside men in ordained ministry. And it has a heavy emphasis on the application of faith to social justice concerns.

Format and Contents

The document is arranged in six sections with a Trinitarian core. The opening lines echo the Heidelberg Catechism’s first question, assigning the entire scope of human life and death to the reign of God and acknowledging him as our only trust. Trust is the organizing theme of this “Brief Statement,” clearly expressing that faith is not simply intellectual assent to concepts, but a relationship of fidelity.

The second section speaks of our trust in Jesus Christ. In contrast to earlier Confessions it places much emphasis on his life and ministry, again highlighting concerns of social justice, and it naturally places some emphasis on the *Christus Victor* theory of atonement in contrast to the heavy emphasis of penal substitution in the Reformation confessions. Notably absent is discussion of his ascension and return.

The third section speaks of our trust in God the Father. This section covers creation, sin, and redemption, highlighting God’s covenant faithfulness throughout the biblical history. Notably and almost uniquely present here are links between human sin and exploitation of others and God’s creation. Its take on the image of God is also unique in its social aspect, proposing that this image is the basis of an ideal universal community of humanity, a concept that might run counter to its intended point of first addressing Jesus Christ, through whom we know God, indicating a potentially conflicting understanding of creation, reconciliation, and election. There are influences from Karl Barth here, but in an incomplete way that is logically inconsistent. If the image of God is the point of unity in humanity, this needs to be known through Jesus Christ and reconciliation, not through creation. And this is no small matter, because, by placing human unity in creation and not in reconciliation, this document potentially diminishes the role of Jesus Christ as the true image of God and the only source of true unity. However, the rationale for such a move is clear: this enables the church to engage with social justice initiatives without requiring reference to Jesus Christ, and thus participate in the common good without giving authority for the good to Jesus Christ.

The fourth section speaks of our trust in God the Holy Spirit. Uniquely present here is the notion that the Spirit is the basis of self-acceptance, as well as love of God and neighbor. The Spirit is the source of unity in the body of Christ, the one who unmasks idolatries within and without the church. The Spirit enables us to hear the voices of the oppressed, and to work for justice, freedom, and peace.

The fourth and fifth sections are brief, acknowledging with Paul that nothing can separate us from God in Christ Jesus, and concluding with a *Gloria Patri*.

Inclusion

The issue of inclusion of “A Brief Statement of Faith” is somewhat complicated. Alongside the Confession of 1967, it is a document unique to the PC(USA), written for its own purposes. It is the only confessional support for ECO’s emphasis on egalitarian ministry, as well as other articles in the *Essential Tenets*. There are some clear and important shifts that contrast with earlier confessions. Churches will need to consider whether the culture of ECO is well reflected in the “Brief Statement.” Would you be happy reciting this together in a worship service, or would it jar with the emphases of your church? **If our *Essential Tenets* are to have full confessional support, we must include some document that supports egalitarian ministry and election for the sake of blessing at a minimum. If “A Brief Statement” is rejected, it would be necessary to create a replacement statement.** Is the beginning of ECO as momentous as the reunion of Northern and Southern Presbyterianism in 1983? If so, one solution could be the commissioning of a replacement for “A Brief Statement of Faith (PCUSA)” that is similarly suitable for corporate worship settings to help create unity of purpose as “we seek to be a movement, not just a denomination.”

NOTES

References for the Essential Tenets in the Book of Confessions

Doctrine	Nicene Creed	Apostles' Creed	Scots Confession	Heidelberg	Second Helvetic	WCF	WSC	WLC	Barmen	1967	Brief Statement
Glorifying and enjoying God are the end of human life			3.01				7.001	7.111			
Jesus is the Word, that is, God's authoritative self-revelation.						6.004			8.11	9.27	
The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the infallible and inspired Word of God, teaching all that is necessary for faith and life.			3.19		5.001–003	6.005–006	7.002–003	7.113–115			
God is Triune, that is, one being, three persons.	1.1–3	2.1–3	3.01	4.025	5.015–018	6.013	7.006	7.119			10.1
The Son is eternally begotten of the Father.	1.2				5.016	6.013		7.120			
The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.	1.3				5.016	6.013		7.120			
The three persons are consubstantial, coeternal, and coequal.					5.017	~6.013					
God is infinite, eternal, immutable, impassible, ineffable, undivided, the source of goodness, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent.			3.01		5.015	6.011		7.117			
Creation was an act of God's grace, not driven by need or lack.											
The act of creation was for the sake of God's glory.						6.022					
Creation continues to be maintained by God's sovereignty and providence.				4.027	5.029	6.024		7.128			
Human beings are made in God's image.			3.02	4.006	5.034	6.023	7.010	7.127			10.3
Jesus Christ is truly God and truly human.	1.2		3.06	4.015–018	5.062, 064	6.044–045		7.146			10.2
Jesus' two natures are distinct and distinguishable.			3.06		5.066	6.044		7.148–150			
His divine nature is not limited, impaired, or changed by assuming our human nature.				4.048	5.066	6.044					

Doctrine	Nicene Creed	Apostles' Creed	Scots Confession	Heidelberg	Second Helvetic	WCF	WSC	WLC	Barmen	1967	Brief Statement
Jesus is ascended in his resurrected body and remains truly human.	1.2	2.2	3.11	4.049	5.073–074	6.046		7.163			
Jesus will return visibly in the body to judge the living and the dead.	1.2	2.2	3.11	4.052	5.074	6.046		7.166			
The Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to confess Jesus as Lord and God.			3.12		5.005	6.053	7.089	7.169		9.49	
God made the world good.					5.032	6.022	7.009	7.125		9.46	10.3
Our free rebellion against God's will is the source of the world's present misery, disorder, and evil.					5.036–037					9.12	
The Fall distorts our relationships with the created world, with each other, and with God: our natural tendency is now to exploit the creation, treat other people with injustice, and fall into idolatry.										9.12, 47	10.3
Sin poisons all of human life.			3.15	4.007	5.037	6.032	7.018	7.137–138		9.12	
We are born dead in our sin; therefore, salvation must be at God's initiative.			3.02	4.008	5.037	6.033		7.135			
We are each deserving of eternal condemnation.				4.012	5.038	6.036	7.019	7.139			10.3 (not eternal)
Jesus offered Himself for us on the cross, saving us from sin and death by bearing our punishment and by offering God the perfect obedience due to Him.			3.09	4.001, 032, 034	5.108	6.043–050, 162	7.025	7.154		9.08	10.2
We are declared justified because of God's grace.				4.033, 056, 060	5.107–110	6.070	7.033	7.181	8.26		10.4
Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father.				4.020	5.077	6.058	7.021	7.146		9.10, 13, 14	
God's love restores His image within us.				4.086			7.035	7.185			
We lost true freedom of the will in the Fall and cannot turn to God on our own. In Christ, our freedom is restored.			3.03		5.043, 047	6.061–062		7.137, 195			
God chooses us for Himself in grace before the foundation of the world, not because of any merit on our part, but only because of His love and mercy.			3.08		5.052–053	6.018, 065	7.020	7.123, 177			

Doctrine	Nicene Creed	Apostles' Creed	Scots Confession	Heidelberg	Second Helvetic	WCF	WSC	WLC	Barmen	1967	Brief Statement
We are elect in order to bless others, by witnessing to God's grace.											10.3
Christ sends us into the world to make disciples, to care for the natural world, to claim all areas of culture in the name of Jesus, to serve the poor, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, and defend the helpless.						~6.187-190			8.26	9.43-47	
We are called to live out our faith within the covenant community of the church.			3.16	4.054-055	5.136	6.147		~7.173		9.36	
We must pray and work for the unity of the church throughout the world.								7.293			
The church must already now begin to reflect the eschatological reality of including people from every tribe, and tongue, and nation.									Historical Context	9.44-45	
God's grace is extended through the preaching of the Word, the administration of the Sacraments, and the faithful practice of mutual discipline.			3.18	4.065-067	5.169	6.149-172	7.088 (-discipline)	7.145 (-discipline)	8.26	9.36	
Through the work of the Holy Spirit, the word preached may become God's direct speech to us.					5.004-007		7.089	7.265		9.30, 49	
Infant baptism signals that we believe in salvation by God's gracious initiative, not by our decision or work.					5.192						
In the Lord's Supper, the Spirit unites us to the ascended Christ and nourishes us with His resurrection life.			3.21	4.076	5.198-201, 205						
Church discipline is how we help one another to grow in grace.					5.165	6.171					
The ministries of the church reflect the three-fold office of Christ as prophet, priest, and king – reflected in the church's ordered ministries of teaching elders, deacons, and ruling elders.											

Doctrine	Nicene Creed	Apostles' Creed	Scots Confession	Heidelberg	Second Helvetic	WCF	WSC	WLC	Barmen	1967	Brief Statement
Men and women alike are called to all the ministries of the Church.											10.4
No part of human life is off limits to the sanctifying claims of God.						6.076	7.035	7.185	8.14–15	9.53	
Progress in holiness is an expected response of gratitude to the grace of God, made possible by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.				4.070	5.093	6.077	7.036	7.185			
The first response of gratitude is prayer.				4.116							
We are especially guided by the Ten Commandments in living grateful lives of holiness.				4.086–091		6.106	7.041	7.207–208			
First: We must worship God alone, renouncing idolatry and inordinate loves.			3.01	4.094–095			7.045–048	7.213–216	8.17–18		
Second: We must worship God humbly, aware of the dangers of images and ideas of God that can become idolatrous, keeping preaching and sacraments central.				4.096–098	5.020–021		7.049–052	7.217–220			
Third: We must eliminate from both speech and thought any blasphemy, irreverence or impurity.				4.099–102			7.053–056	7.221–224			
Fourth: We must observe the Sabbath as a day of worship and rest, gathering with the people of God.				4.103			7.057–062	7.225–231			
Fifth: We must give honor to those in authority over us and practice mutual submission within the church.				4.104			7.063–066	7.233–243	8.22		
Sixth: We must eradicate anger, violence, bitterness, and instead cultivate gentleness; we must recognize the image of God in every human being from conception to natural death.				4.105–107			7.067–069	7.244–246			

Doctrine	Nicene Creed	Apostles' Creed	Scots Confession	Heidelberg	Second Helvetic	WCF	WSC	WLC	Barmen	1967	Brief Statement
Seventh: We must maintain chastity in thought and deed, being faithful within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman as established by God at the creation or embracing a celibate life as established by Jesus in the new covenant.				4.108–109			7.070–072	7.247–249			
Eighth: We must practice right stewardship of the goods we have been given, showing charity to others and giving generously to the ministry of the church.				4.110–111			7.073–075	7.250–252			
Ninth: We must pursue and defend the truth, even when this is costly, since truth is in order to goodness.				4.112			7.076–078	7.253–255			
Tenth: We must resist envy, greed, and acquisitiveness, instead being content with what God has given us.				4.113			7.079–81	7.256–258			
Jesus is the perfect exemplar of a holy life.				4.036							
We are only holy through His holiness.				4.060–061							

 shows weak support

 shows no support

Sample Questions to Ask when considering our confessional standards

- ▶ Does the system of doctrine in a confession accurately and faithfully reflect the theological teaching of the Scriptures?

- ▶ Does the confession reflect the grace, love, and joy of the gospel?

- ▶ Does it enable the church to confess what it believes and hold the church to believe what it confesses?

- ▶ Is it clear, and does it speak in a concise, accessible, and warm manner to the whole church?

- ▶ Does it call for both affirmation and rejection?

- ▶ Does it represent merely the interests of one group in the church, or does it take responsibility to speak from and to the one universal church?

- ▶ Does it speak only to its own temporal context, or does it speak of the eternal truths of Scripture?

- ▶ Does it allow the eternal truths of Scripture to speak into our context?

Subscription to the Confessions

MORE STRICT ← → **MORE LENIENT**

Indifference	Strict Subscription	Subscription that is binding and plenary	Subscription that is “appropriating,” but not “loose” or indeterminate	Lenient Subscription	Indifference
Anti-Confessional Biblicism	verbatim subscription Repristination Juridical confessionalism Strict Constructionist <i>“ipsissima verba”</i> Closed confessionalism	“Substance or Substantial Subscription”; “Differentiating Complete Subscription”; “Constructive confessionalism” “ <i>quia</i> ” (because of) confessionalism; “plenary confessionalism”	“Essential Tenet” subscription “Appropriating confessionalism” (as opposed to “binding confessionalism”)	“Attitudinal Interpretation”; “ <i>Quatenus</i> ” (insofar as) confessionalism (see note below); “Floating” or “open” confessionalism; “Loose” or latitudinarian subscriptionists; Confessions as “points of reference” or “guideposts”	Liberal nonconfessionalism Antisubscriptionists
	The view that subscribers are bound to the exact words of the confession, as they were understood when they were written.	The view that subscribers are bound by (a) the entire confessional document because the documents offer faithful interpretation of scripture, and (b) by the task of continuing to articulate and practice the Christian faith in different historical and cultural contexts. Subscribers are not bound to think that the confessions are the best possible articulation of specific themes for every time and place, and are bound to develop ever more faithful ways of speaking and practicing the faith, revising the confessions when necessary.	The view that subscribers are bound only to the essential tenets of a given confession, rather than to the entirety of the documents, and that subscribers only agree to “appropriate” the themes of the confessions, rather than be bound to them and to promote them actively.	The view that the confessions are only binding “insofar as” they agree with scripture, and that they primarily offer an instructive example of how to speak of God and the world, rather than offering any binding content.	



ECO

A Covenant Order
of Evangelical
Presbyterians