BOOK OF CONFESSIONS
of the
Presbyterian Church (USA)

CONTENTS

A. *Why a Book of Confessions*

For most of their history Presbyterians in the United States were guided by essentially a single confessional standard: the Westminster Confession with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms that translated it into question and answer form for educational purposes. It is not surprising then that many Presbyterians have been dis-turbed by the idea of a book of confessions: Is it not contrary to Reformed tradition? Does not the adoption of a plurality of confessions water down or compromise the confessional nature of the Presbyterian Church? Will not Presbyterians be confused by so many documents, especially since they do not always say the same thing? Will they not tend to pay little attention to any of them because they are over-whelmed by so much confessional material? Two answers can be given to these questions, the first historical and the second theological.

In the first place there is a historical answer. Although the idea of a collection of confessions is relatively new for North American Presbyterians, it is not at all new in the history of the Reformed tradition. In 1581 (still in the period of the Reformation itself) the Reformed churches of Europe issued a *Harmonia Confessionum Fidei* (*A Harmony of Confessions of Faith*) which set out in parallel form the main doctrines of the confessions of eight Reformed and three Lutheran churches. This harmony listed the agreement between the various confessions but pointed out the disagreements as well. Moreover, in the eighteenth century, the Church of Scotland officially authorized eight different confessional documents besides the Westminster Confession as teaching instruments of the church. Both the Heidelberg Catechism and the Second Helvetic Confession have long been standards for most Reformed bodies around the world. Reformed churches in America have been the exception rather than the rule with their single standard. Most Reformed churches have believed that a plurality of confessions enriches rather than compromises Reformed faith and practice.

Secondly, there is a theological reason for a book of confessions. We have just discussed the reasons why Reformed Christians cannot recognize any one confession as a final, infallible encapsulation of true Christian faith and life for all Christians, everywhere, now and forever. A book of confessions that includes some classical Reformed confessions and leaves room for new confessions makes unmistakably clear one of the most distinctive marks of the Reformed tradition.

B. *Why This* Book of Confessions

The most immediate explanation for the content of the *Book of Confessions* is that it is the result of the combination of doctrinal standards that came with Presbyterian reunion in 1983. This amounted to adding the Larger Catechism from the three Westminster documents that were standards in the former Presbyterian Church in the United States to the *Book of Confessions* already adopted by the former United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

But the question remains, why this selection from the great number of authentic Reformed confessions that could have been chosen? The answer is that the *Book of Confessions* contains a cross-section of ecumenical and Reformed confessions with wide geographical and historical representation.

The Nicene and Apostles' Creeds from the ancient church come as close as any other confessional statements to expressing the faith of all Christians, of all tradi-

tions, throughout church history. Their inclusion points to the ecumenical character of our church.

The Scots Confession (1560) was written mostly by John Knox, student of Calvin and father of English-speaking Reformed Christianity.

The German Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and the Swiss Second Helvetic Confession (1566) are, as we have noted, probably the two most widely accepted confessional statements among Reformed Christians throughout the world.

The originally British Westminster Confession and Catechisms (1647) have been the primary standard for the Presbyterian branch of the Reformed family not only in our country but wherever Presbyterian Churches have sent missionaries.

The Barmen Declaration (1933), written by Lutheran and Reformed Christians working together (and thus another ecumenical document), confesses the lordship of Christ especially in relation to political issues that are critical for all Christians in the modern world.

The Confession of 1967, the only specifically American confession in the book, addresses critical issues of Christian faithfulness in our time and place.

The *Book of Confessions* as a whole enriches our understanding of what it means to be Reformed Christians, helps us escape the provincialism to which we have been prone, and expresses our intention to join the worldwide family of Reformed churches that is far bigger and more inclusive than our particular denomination.

D. *The* Book of Confessions *and Ordination*

The church does not require acceptance of the church's confessions for church membership. All who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are welcome to join and participate in fellowship. But to ensure that those who lead the church do so in faithfulness to its doctrine and form of government, the church does require ordained ministers, elders, and deacons to declare their adherence to the confessions of the church. In order to understand what they commit themselves to when they do this, it is important to note the sequence of questions asked at ordination and the precise wording of the third question. The first five questions are:

a. Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

b. Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal, and God's word to you?

c. Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?

d. Will you fulfill your office in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?

e. Will you be governed by our church's polity, and will you abide by its discipline? Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God's Word and Spirit?

These questions are very carefully worded to preserve in the church the same understanding of the authority of confessions characteristic of the Reformed tradition in general. That is, they seek to protect both freedom and variety in the church and the authority and unity of the church. The following two sections of this paper must therefore be held closely together.

1. *Freedom and Variety in the Church*

The same freedom and variety that is characteristic of the Reformed tradition in general is expressed in the questions asked of candidates for ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

a. Ordained persons are asked to acknowledge the *Book of Confessions* as "authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do." These words limit the authority of the book by making its authority subordinate to the higher authority of Scripture—which in turn (according to the first two questions) derives its authority from its witness to the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ who alone has the right to claim absolute and unqualified loyalty and obedience.

b. Ordained persons are required to be "instructed and led" and "continually guided" by the church's confessions. These words demand study of the confessions. They also provide freedom from a demand for unqualified assent to everything the confessions ask us to think, say, and do and freedom from a legalistic interpretation of the confessions.

c. Since 1983 ordained persons are asked to receive and adopt the "essential tenets" of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions. Although some other wording may better express the intent, the phrase "essential tenets" is intended to protect freedom with the limits of general commitment to the confessions. That this is indeed the purpose of the phrase is made clear by the fact that both the former United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and Presbyterian Church in the U.S. repeatedly answered in the negative overtures requesting that the church make a precise list of a few fundamental doctrines (once called "essential and necessary articles of faith") that must be accepted by ordained officers. Moreover, while Chapter II of the Form of Government lists a number of general theological affirmations to summarize the broad general character of Presbyterian faith and life,

it too prescribes no specific understanding of any of these affirmations to test the acceptability of people for ordained office in the church.

The ordination question that asks for commitment to the "essential tenets" of the confessions brings freedom in the church at several levels. Ordained persons are free to be "instructed," "led," and "continually guided" by the confessions without being forced to subscribe to any precisely worded articles of faith drawn up either by the General Assembly or by a presbytery. (Presbyteries, too, are bound to the constitutional language that excludes demand for adherence to any specifically worded interpretations of a few selected doctrines. In a presbytery the decision for ordination is always determined by the concrete encounter between the presbytery and the candidate.) Presbyteries (in the case of ministers) and church sessions (in the case of elders and deacons) are free to decide for themselves what acceptable loyalty to the confessions means in their particular situation without being bound to any "check list" prescribed by higher governing bodies of the church.

2. *The Authority and Unity of the Church*

The ordination questions make room for freedom in the church but not for unlimited freedom. They also protect the authority and unity of the church:

a. To be an ordained Presbyterian is not only to acknowledge the superior authority of God in Christ as proclaimed by Scripture but also to recognize the church's confessions as "authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do."

While confessional standards are subordinate to the Scriptures, they are, nevertheless, standards. They are not lightly drawn up or subscribed to, nor may they be ignored or dismissed. The church is prepared to counsel with or even discipline one ordained who seriously rejects the faith expressed in the confessions (*Book of Order*, G-2.0200 [F-2.02 in the current *Book of Order*]).

b. To be an ordained Presbyterian is to promise to be "instructed," "led," and "continually guided" by the confessions of the church—not just by one's personal theological and ethical preferences or even by one's own personal understanding of God or Jesus Christ or Scripture. The church should not "bind the conscience" of those who disagree with its confessions and interpretation of their meaning. When an individual or group of individuals disagree with the consensus of the church, the church must first examine itself to see whether it needs to reform its confessional stance. Nevertheless, in the Presbyterian Church the consensus of the church concerning the meaning of faith and life takes precedence over the opinions and preferences of individuals and groups in the church, and may lead to the refusal of ordination to those who disagree with the church.

c. To be an ordained Presbyterian is to acknowledge the authority of each individual confession in the *Book of Confessions* and the book as a whole, not just the authority of selected sections from the confessions or the authority of one or another preferred confession in the book. While reception and adoption of the *Book*

of Confessions means freedom from the imposition of a list of specific doctrinal formulations, it does not mean freedom to select from the book whatever an individual or group in the church chooses. An appropriate governing body as a whole may decide that some statements in the confessions are central and others peripheral, some no longer authoritative and others still authoritative for the church in our place and time. It may decide that there is or is not room for difference in the church regarding the authority of this or that statement. But in the Presbyterian Church the decision about what is "essential and necessary" belongs not to individuals or groups in the church but to the appropriate governing body of the church as it makes decisions in particular cases.

It is important to emphasize that it is not only individual ordained persons but also general assemblies, presbyteries, and synods that are to be instructed, led, and continually guided by the church's confessions.

3. *Guidelines*

In light of the foregoing discussion of the freedom and variety and authority and unity of the church, the following guidelines may be seen as conclusions drawn from these discussions and as guidance for individuals and groups concerned with the ordination of pastors, elders, and deacons.

a. General Assemblies, synods, presbyteries, and sessions, as well as individual church officers, should be led, instructed, and continually guided by the whole *Book of Confessions*.

b. The confessions of the *Book of Confessions* are standards, in response to the historical context of the time, which are subordinate to Scripture; they are subject to criticism in light of the word of God in Jesus Christ as witnessed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and may be revised by the Church following duly prescribed procedures.

c. The confessions are serious statements and are "not to be taken lightly." While neither the General Assembly nor any presbytery or session should demand adherence to any specific list of beliefs or doctrinal formulations as if the content of the faith could be reduced to a few selected and precisely worded statements of doctrine, General Assemblies, synods, presbyteries, and sessions have the responsibility of determining on a case by case basis whether candidates for ordination adhere to the standards of doctrine as set out in the confessions.

d. When individuals or groups in the church call into question some aspect of the confessions or of the church's interpretation of them, those who hear that objection should consider the possibility that the dispute may point to a deficiency in present confessional standards, remembering that, indeed, synods or councils may err and that the church is always to be reformed (sempter reformanda). However, after due consideration, the court of jurisdiction must decide whether such objection is to be allowed to stand or is to be ruled as being out of conformity with the confessional standards of the church.

e. Thus, when individuals or groups in the church persist in disagreeing with the confessions or the church's interpretation of them, the appropriate church body has the responsibility of determining whether the disagreement is sufficient to prevent the approval of a candidate for ordination to the office of pastor, elder, or deacon.

f. So long as presbyteries do not contradict specific interpretations of the confessions made by the General Assembly, and so long as sessions do not contradict those made by the Assembly or by their presbytery, presbyteries and sessions have the right and responsibility to interpret for themselves whether candidates for ordination and ordained persons, for whom they are responsible, hold to the "essentials" of the faith as articulated by the confessions of the church (the constitutional right of appeal being understood).

THE NICENE CREED

[TEXT]

The Nicene Creed

In the first three centuries, the church found itself in a hostile environment. On the one hand, it grappled with the challenge of relating the language of the gospel, developed in a Hebraic and Jewish-Christian context, to a Graeco-Roman world. On the other hand, it was threatened not only by persecution, but also by ideas that were in conflict with the biblical witness.

In A.D. 312, Constantine won control of the Roman Empire in the battle of Milvian Bridge. Attributing his victory to the intervention of Jesus Christ, he elevated Christianity to favored status in the empire. "One God, one Lord, one faith, one church, one empire, one emperor" became his motto.

The new emperor soon discovered that "one faith and one church" were fractured by theological disputes, especially conflicting understandings of the nature of Christ, long a point of controversy. Arius, a priest of the church in Alexandria, asserted that the divine Christ, the Word through whom all things have their existence, was *created* by God before the beginning of time. Therefore, the divinity of Christ was similar to the divinity of God, but not of the same essence. Arius was opposed by the bishop, Alexander, together with his associate and successor Athanasius. They affirmed that the divinity of Christ, the Son, is of the same substance as the divinity of God, the Father. To hold otherwise, they said, was to open the possibility of polytheism, and to imply that knowledge of God in Christ was not final knowledge of God.

To counter a widening rift within the church, Constantine convened a council in Nicaea in A.D. 325. A creed reflecting the position of Alexander and Athanasius was written and signed by a majority of the bishops. Nevertheless, the two parties continued to battle each other. In 381, a second council met in Constantinople. It adopted a revised and expanded form of the A.D. 325 creed, now known as the Nicene Creed.

The Nicene Creed is the most ecumenical of creeds. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) joins with Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and most Protestant churches in affirming it. Nevertheless, in contrast to Eastern Orthodox churches, the western churches state that the Holy Spirit proceeds not only from the Father, but from the Father *and the Son* (Latin, *filioque*). To the eastern churches, saying that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both Father and Son threatens the distinctiveness of the person of the Holy Spirit; to the western churches, the *filioque* guards the unity of the triune God. This issue remains unresolved in the ecumenical dialogue.

THE NICENE CREED

1.1 We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is,
seen and unseen.

1.2 We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

1.3 We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

THE APOSTLES' CREED

[TEXT]

The Apostles' Creed

Although not written by apostles, the Apostles' Creed reflects the theological formulations of the first century church. The creed's structure may be based on Jesus' command to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In a time when most Christians were illiterate, oral repetition of the Apostles' Creed, along with the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments, helped preserve and transmit the faith of the western churches. The Apostles' Creed played no role in Eastern Orthodoxy.

In the early church, Christians confessed that "Jesus is Lord" but did not always understand the biblical context of lordship. The views of Marcion, a Christian living in Rome in the second century, further threatened the church's understanding of Jesus as Lord. Marcion read the Old Testament as referring to a tyrannical God who had created a flawed world. Marcion believed that Jesus revealed, in contrast, a good God of love and mercy. For Marcion, then, Jesus was not the Messiah proclaimed by the prophets, and the Old Testament was not Scripture. Marcion proposed limiting Christian "Scripture" to Luke's gospel (less the birth narrative and other parts that he felt expressed Jewish thinking) and to those letters of Paul that Marcion regarded as anti-Jewish. Marcion's views developed into a movement that lasted several centuries.

Around A.D. 180, Roman Christians developed an early form of the Apostles' Creed to refute Marcion. They affirmed that the God of creation is the Father of Jesus Christ, who was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, was buried and raised from the dead, and ascended into heaven, where he rules with the Father. They also affirmed belief in the Holy Spirit, the church, and the resurrection of the body.

Candidates for membership in the church, having undergone a lengthy period of moral and doctrinal instruction, were asked at baptism to state what they believed. They responded in the words of this creed.

The Apostles' Creed underwent further development. In response to the question of readmitting those who had denied the faith during the persecutions of the second and third centuries, the church added, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." In the fourth and fifth centuries, North African Christians debated the question of whether the church was an exclusive sect composed of the heroic few or an inclusive church of all who confessed Jesus Christ, leading to the addition of "holy" (belonging to God) and "catholic" (universal). In Gaul, in the fifth century, the phrase "he descended into hell" came into the creed. By the eighth century, the creed had attained its present form.

THE APOSTLES' CREED

2.1 I BELIEVE in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,

2.2 And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

2.3 I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

A BRIEF STATEMENT OF FAITH—PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

[TEXT]

A Brief Statement of Faith

In 1983, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was formed by the reunion of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the Presbyterian Church in the United States. Integral to reunion was the preparation of a brief statement of faith. While recognizing realities of diversity and disagreement in both the church and the world, members of the drafting committee sought to articulate Presbyterians' common identity.

Early in its discussions, the committee decided to write a statement of faith that could be used in worship. The committee drew extensively on the documents in the *Book of Confessions* and on Scripture for its formulations, and arranged them within a trinitarian framework.

The Brief Statement of Faith (statement) is distinctive in several respects. Unlike the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, which move directly from Jesus' birth to his death, the statement emphasizes the significance of Jesus' ministry in Judea and Galilee. The Brief Statement of Faith emphasizes gender-inclusiveness. It underscores the role of both men and women in God's covenant, uses feminine as well as masculine imagery of God, and affirms ordination of both women and men. The statement also expresses concern for the integrity of God's creation.

Affirming at its beginning that "In life and death we belong to God" (11.1, line 1) and, at its end, that "nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord," (11.05, lines 78, 79) the Brief Statement of Faith concludes liturgically with the church's familiar doxology of praise and thanksgiving.

PREFACE[1] TO
A BRIEF STATEMENT OF FAITH
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

In 1983 the two largest Presbyterian churches in the United States reunited. *The Plan for Reunion* called for the preparation of a brief statement of the Reformed faith for possible inclusion in the *Book of Confessions*. This statement is therefore not intended to stand alone, apart from the other confessions of our church. It does not pretend to be a complete list of all our beliefs, nor does it explain any of them in detail. It is designed to be confessed by the whole congregation in the setting of public worship, and it may also serve pastors and teachers as an aid to Christian instruction. It celebrates our rediscovery that for all our undoubted diversity, we are bound together by a common faith and a common task.

The faith we confess unites us with the one, universal church. The most important beliefs of Presbyterians are those we share with other Christians, and especially with other evangelical Christians who look to the Protestant Reformation as a renewal of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Diversity remains. But we are thankful that in our time the many churches are learning to accept, and even to affirm, diversity without divisiveness, since the whole counsel of God is more than the wisdom of any individual or any one tradition. The Spirit of Truth gives new light to the churches when they are willing to become pupils together of the Word of God. This statement therefore intends to confess the catholic faith.

We are convinced that to the Reformed churches a distinctive vision of the catholic faith has been entrusted for the good of the whole church. Accordingly, "A Brief Statement of Faith" includes the major themes of the Reformed tradition (such as those mentioned in the *Book of Order*, The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, Chapter 2),[2] without claiming them as our private possession, just as we ourselves hope to learn and to share the wisdom and insight given to traditions other than our own. And as a confession that seeks to be both catholic and Reformed, the statement (following the apostle's blessing in 2 Cor. 13:14) is a trinitarian confession in which the grace of Jesus Christ has first place as the foundation of our knowledge of God's sovereign love and our life together in the Holy Spirit.

No confession of faith looks merely to the past; every confession seeks to cast the light of a priceless heritage on the needs of the present moment, and so to shape the future. Reformed confessions, in particular, when necessary even reform the tradition itself in the light of the Word of God. From the first, the Reformed churches have insisted that the renewal of the church must become visible in the transformation of human lives and societies. Hence "A Brief Statement of Faith" lifts up concerns that call most urgently for the church's attention in our

[1] The preface and the appendix do not have confessional authority.
[2] The appendix provides cross-references that will enable the reader to place the affirmations of "A Brief Statement of Faith" in the context of the Reformed tradition.

time. The church is not a refuge from the world; an elect people is chosen for the blessing of the nations. A sound confession, therefore, proves itself as it nurtures commitment to the church's mission, and as the confessing church itself becomes the body by which Christ continues the blessing of his earthly ministry.

THE STATEMENT

11.1

In life and in death we belong to God.
Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.

11.2

We trust in Jesus Christ,
fully human, fully God.
Jesus proclaimed the reign of God:
preaching good news to the poor
and release to the captives,
teaching by word and deed
and blessing the children,
healing the sick
and binding up the brokenhearted,
eating with outcasts,
forgiving sinners,
and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.
Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition,
Jesus was crucified,
suffering the depths of human pain
and giving his life for the sins of the world.
God raised this Jesus from the dead,
vindicating his sinless life,
breaking the power of sin and evil,
delivering us from death to life eternal.

11.3

We trust in God,
whom Jesus called Abba, Father.
In sovereign love God created the world good
and makes everyone equally in God's image,
male and female, of every race and people,
to live as one community.
But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.
Ignoring God's commandments.
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
accept lies as truth,
exploit neighbor and nature,
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation.
Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.
In everlasting love,

the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
to bless all families of the earth.
Hearing their cry,
God delivered the children of Israel
from the house of bondage.
Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.

11.4

We trust in God the Holy Spirit
everywhere the giver and renewer of life.
The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,
sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,
and binds us together with all believers
in the one body of Christ, the Church.
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,
engages us through the Word proclaimed,
claims us in the waters of baptism,
feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,
and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.
In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.
In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

11.5

With believers in every time and place,
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

11.6

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

* Instead of saying this line, congregations may wish to sing a version of the Gloria.