

The Book of Confessions

We are a confessional Church, which means we see ourselves as Catholic, Reformed and Evangelical. The Confessions of our Church, eleven in number, are subordinate standards of faith. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are “the infallible rule of faith and life,” as the Westminster Confessions refers to them, “the unique and authoritative witness to Word of God,” which is Jesus Christ. They are not a witness among other, but one without parallel. The Creeds and Confessions of our Church are useful in as much as they are reliable expositions of what scripture leads us to believe and do.

The Confessions function in the life of the Church in the following ways:

1. **Worship.** Like the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, our confessions are meant to be used in the worship life of the church. They remind us the creeds and confessions of the church are first acts of praise, thanksgiving and commitment in the presence of the Living God. We must begin with doxology before we can ever find faithful theology.
2. **Defense of orthodoxy.** Most confessions and creeds emerged out of some conflict as a means of stating and defending truth in the ways we state Christian faith over and against a distortion or perversion of the faith. They serve as one way that the Church engages in the Great End of “The Preservation of the Truth.”
3. **Instruction.** The Confessions serve to instruct and inform pastoral and lay leaders in the faithful interpretation of scripture. The Catechisms served a vital role in educating children and adult converts, usually focusing on the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments taught through a question and answer format.
4. **Rallying point in times of danger and persecution.** The Theological Declaration of Barmen is the best example of this, as Christians found strength in standing together against those forces of evil that threatened the Church and the faith.
5. **Church order and discipline.** We have sought to preserve the peace, unity and purity of the Church by establishing standards and parameters for theological truth. While the Presbyterian Church has always had a wide door for membership, asking only of one’s confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, it has maintained a much narrower door for its ordained leaders. The question you will be asked is, “Do you receive and adopt the Confessions of our Church as faithful and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed by these as you lead the people of God?”

The Confessions can be categorized in three large groups:

1. **The ecumenical creeds of the early Church.**
 - A. **Nicene Creed** (325-381).
 - B. **Apostles’ Creed.** (While this Creed is largely present as we find it today as early as 180, it doesn’t take its present form until the eighth century, used as a baptismal formula in France.)
2. **The Reformation Creeds.**
 - A. **Scots Confession** (1560). John Knox and five other Scottish clerics, all with the first name of John, wrote this document in four days.

- B. **Heidelberg Catechism** (1562). Zacharias Ursinus and Kaspar Olevianus wrote this for use to resolve differences between Lutherans and Reformed Christians. It is an irenic catechism, and each question is addressed to “you,” making it personal as well. It covers the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Sacraments and the Lord’s Prayer. The section on Christian life comes under the broad title “Thankfulness.”
- C. **Second Helvetic Confession** (1561). Helvetic is Latin for Swiss, and this is a confession that emerged out of the Reformed Church of what we know today as Switzerland. It is the work of the brilliant successor of Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, Heinrich Bullinger. This is an exquisite and sensitive statement of Reformed faith, and offers a wonderful chapter on predestination.
- D. **Westminster Confession of Faith** (1647). While drafted originally by the English Parliament, it bears the influence of the five Scottish clerics who were present as advisors. It proved to be far more influential in Scotland and later in America, especially through the Westminster Shorter Catechism. The Confession is a second-generation Reformation document, and as such, it reflects the later Calvinistic doctrine of double predestination, which was later amended by the General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland and both major American Presbyterian General Assemblies around this controversial doctrine of the Church.
- E. **Westminster Shorter Catechism** (1647). The work of John Wallis, a celebrated mathematician from Oxford, this was intended for children, but has had far-reaching influence over morals and beliefs among Christians in Scotland and America. Its first question and answer remain one of the most important and distinctive Presbyterian and Reformed affirmations!
- F. **Westminster Larger Catechism** (1647). The work of Cambridge Professor Anthony Tuckney, this was intended to be preached and used for instruction from the pulpit. Like the Shorter Catechism, it does not make use of the Apostles’ Creed, though it lists it at the end.

3. Creeds and Confessions of the Twentieth Century Church.

- A. **Theological Declaration of Barmen** (1934). Written by a group of German and Swiss pastors and theologians, led largely by Karl Barth and Martin Niemöller, this confession of faith proclaims bravely that the Church serves Jesus Christ as Lord and can serve no other. The Confessing Church stood over and against National Socialism and the “German Christians” who gave into and followed Hitler’s Germany in hatred and ultimate persecution of the Jews.
- B. **Confession of 1967** (1967). This document was the work of a committee named by the General Assembly, made up of the leading theological minds of this generation, chaired by Professor Edward Atkinson Dowey of Princeton Theological Seminary. It is based on II Corinthians 5, and the theme is the reconciliation that Jesus Christ came to bring to the Church. Against the backdrop of a nation divided by issues of racism and a war that caused great division between generations, this Confession calls the Church to be agents of reconciliation, Ambassadors for Christ.
- C. **A Brief Statement of Faith** (1983). Upon the reunion of the two great bodies of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, this statement seeks to articulate in a concise form what Presbyterians have traditionally believed, and to cast it in contemporary language. It is Trinitarian in nature, and was initiated by our first Moderator of the reunited church, Dr. J. Randolph Taylor, who at the time was the Pastor of the Myers Park Presbyterian Church.