

reFORM

VOL. 2, No. 1, SPRING 1999

Jesus Christ in the Confessions

Catherine J. S. Purves: *The Nicene Creed*

George Hunsinger: *The Apostles' Creed*

Richard Paddon: *The Scots Confession*

Karen Petersen Finch: *The Heidelberg Catechism*

Sherron Kay George: *The Second Helvetic
Confession*

Richard A. Ray: *The Westminster Confession*

James R. Edwards: *The Theological Declaration
of Barmen*

Richard Lovelace and John Jefferson Davis:
The Confession of 1967

M. Douglas Harper, Jr.: *A Brief Statement of Faith*

Mark Achtemeier: *Confessing Jesus Christ Today*

Study Guide



Jesus Christ in the Confessions

How Do the Confessions Speak to Us Today?

EDITORIAL BOARD

Dr. M. Craig Barnes
The Rev. Mary Holder Naegeli, Editor
Dr. Andrew Purves
The Rev. Joseph B. Rightmyer

Pamela Bowman, Managing Editor

PRESBYTERIANS FOR RENEWAL

8134 New LaGrange Road, Suite 227
Louisville, Kentucky 40222-4679
(502) 425-4630

PFR reFORM, Vol. 2, No. 1, Spring 1999, Copyright © 1999 by Presbyterians For Renewal. All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced in any form, except for brief quotations in reviews, without written permission from:

Presbyterians For Renewal
8134 New LaGrange Road, Suite 227
Louisville, Kentucky 40222-4679.

Quotations from the *Book of Confessions* are used with the permission of The Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202-1396.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations used in this publication are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV). Copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Introduction

While counseling a couple for marriage recently, I raised the question of religious belief and asked the bride and the groom to explain their faith in a nutshell. Their responses were different and fascinating. One gave a two-sentence answer (unfortunately riddled with heresy) that ended in a stammering, "I just know. I just have this feeling that I know God, but I can't tell you how." The other *began* with stammers, and finally confessed, "I'm very confused about what I believe. It bothers me that I don't really know what is true."

While these admissions were a delightful breakthrough in our conversation in preparation for marriage, their all-too-disturbing message to me as a pastor was, "Mary, find a better way of teaching the basics of the faith to the next generation!"

This issue has come up many times in my ministry, and perhaps in yours, but there is good news to help us fulfill our calling! We have inherited faith statements, hashed out in historic debates and preserved as encouraging witnesses to subsequent generations, collected in the volume called *The Book of Confessions*.

If the day-to-day ministry demands are not motivation enough, we church officers—deacons, elders and ministers of Word and Sacrament—have responded to two constitutional questions (G-14.0405 b) obligating our interest in *The Book of Confessions*:

Question 3. 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?

Question 4. Will you fulfill your office in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?

Every faith declaration contained in the Confessions is unique and different, but they sing with one voice of the centrality, the power and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Often, the creed or catechism is very long and all-encompassing, and a study of each could take years and many, many pages! Therefore, in response to current issues within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we have chosen in this

second issue of *reFORM* to focus on what each confession says about Jesus Christ, the study known as "Christology." The doctrine of Christ is at the heart of our faith, and we are invited to receive it, to adopt it, to be instructed and led by it!

We encourage you to use this issue of *reFORM* hand-in-hand with your own copy of the *Book of Confessions*.^{*} Among its many features is an introduction to each confession giving historical background and an overall thematic orientation. Our hope is that your study, guided by the following essays and the study guide at the end, will encourage you to read the original sources, the confessions themselves, and apply their instruction in your walk with Christ.

How would you explain your faith in a nutshell? Seekers will be asking you soon, because they want to know, and you, as a follower of Christ and a leader in the church, are appointed by God to tell them!

Mary Naegeli
Editor

* *The Book of Confessions* may be ordered from the Presbyterian Distribution Service (1-800-524-2612 or <http://pds.pcusa.org>).

In *reFORM*, references in parentheses are to the marginal numbers found in the *Book of Confessions*. For example, (5.020) refers to the fifth confession (The Second Helvetic Confession), paragraph 20.

Table of Contents

3	<i>Introduction</i>
7	<i>Contributors</i>
11	THE NICENE CREED <i>Who Is Jesus Christ?</i> by Catherine J. S. Purves
15	THE APOSTLES' CREED <i>The Need for the Jesus of History</i> , by George Hunsinger
19	THE SCOTS CONFESSION <i>Christ Jesus Our Salvation</i> , by Richard Paddon
25	THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM <i>Jesus Christ Our Only Comfort</i> , by Karen Petersen Finch
29	THE SECOND HELVETIC CONFESSION <i>Christ, Our Only Mediator and Savior</i> , by Sherron Kay George
34	THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH <i>A Witness of Faith to Jesus Christ</i> , by Richard A. Ray
41	THE THEOLOGICAL DECLARATION OF BARMEN <i>None Other than Jesus Christ</i> , by James R. Edwards
46	THE CONFESSION OF 1967 <i>Jesus Christ Our Reconciler</i> , by Richard Lovelace and John Jefferson Davis
50	A BRIEF STATEMENT OF FAITH <i>We Trust in Jesus Christ</i> , by M. Douglas Harper, Jr.
55	CONFESSING JESUS CHRIST TODAY, by P. Mark Achtemeier
62	<i>Study Guide</i>

Contributors

Catherine J. S. Purves

Rev. Purves studied Philosophical Theology at New College, University of Edinburgh, Scotland (B.D.) and then worked as Assistant Pastor at St. Colm's parish church in Edinburgh. She completed a Masters degree in Sacred Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. In the U.S. she has served the Bethany Presbyterian Church, Bridgeville, and Hoboken Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, both in Pennsylvania. She is married to Dr. Andrew Purves, and they have three children.

George Hunsinger

Dr. Hunsinger is Director of the Center for Barth Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey. His degrees are from Harvard Divinity School (B.D.) and Yale University (Ph.D.) He was the principal author of the new Presbyterian catechism approved by the 210th General Assembly. He and his wife have two children.

Richard Paddon

Rev. Paddon has served First Presbyterian Church, Carbondale, Illinois, since 1988, following four years as Presbyterian Campus Pastor, University of South Carolina, and 14 years as a prep school chaplain, teacher and coach at Webb School of Knoxville, Tennessee. He is a graduate of Wheaton College and Columbia Theological Seminary in Georgia. Paddon currently serves on the PFR Board of Directors. He and his wife, Anna, have three grown sons.

Karen Petersen Finch

Rev. Finch was ordained with her husband, Rev. Kevin Finch, at Whitworth College, Spokane, Washington, in 1994 after receiving her M. Div. at Princeton Theological Seminary. She currently travels around the Seattle Presbytery and beyond, teaching theology to Presbyterians in their churches. In September 1999 she will be Theologian in Residence at First Presbyterian Church, Seattle. The Finches have three children.

Sherron Kay George

Dr. George has been Assistant Professor of Evangelism and Mission at Austin Theological Seminary since 1995. Prior to that, she served as a PC(USA) mission co-worker in Brazil for 23 years where she taught in two different seminaries and two lay institutes. George earned her D.Min. at Columbia Theological Seminary.

Richard A. Ray

Dr. Ray is Professor of Leadership and Ministry at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. For most of his career he has been a pastor, most recently at First Presbyterian Church, Bristol, Tennessee, where he served for 16 years. He is also a former Managing Director and Senior Editor of John Knox Press. His degrees are from Union Theological Seminary in Virginia (M.Div.) and University of St. Andrews in Scotland (Ph.D.). Richard and his wife have three children and three grandchildren.

James R. Edwards

Dr. Edwards is Professor of Religion at Whitworth College, Spokane, Washington, a return to the college where he earned his B.A. He was Associate Pastor and Minister of Students at First Presbyterian Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado, in the 1970s before entering academia. Edwards holds degrees from Princeton Theological Seminary (M.Div.), Fuller Theological Seminary (Ph.D.) and did graduate study at the University of Zurich and graduate sabbaticals in Tuebingen and Greifswald, Germany. He and his wife, Mary Jane, have two grown children and a grandson.

Richard Lovelace

Dr. Lovelace is Emeritus Professor of Church History at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and author of *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (InterVarsity Press, 1978). He is a graduate of Westminster Seminary (M.Div.) and Princeton Theological Seminary (Th.D.). Lovelace serves on the PFR Board of Directors. He and his wife, Betty Lee, have three children and one grandson.

John Jefferson Davis

Dr. Davis served on the staff of Blacknall Memorial Church in Durham, North Carolina, before joining the faculty of Gordon-Conwell Seminary in Massachusetts where he is Professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics. Davis earned his Ph.D. at Duke University. He and his wife have five children.

M. Douglas Harper, Jr.

Dr. Harper currently serves as interim pastor at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas. He was pastor of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Houston, for 35 years before retiring in 1995. His degrees are from Columbia Theological Seminary (B.D.) and Duke University (Ph.D.) where he focused on the history of American Christianity. He has been an active participant in the denomination, serving on both the Joint Committee on Union and the Committee to Write a Brief Statement of Faith, the confession he examines for us in this issue. Harper was an original member of the PFR Board of Directors. He and his wife, Emmy, have four children and five granddaughters.

P. Mark Achtemeier

Dr. Achtemeier is Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology and Ethics, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa, where he has taught since 1995. He studied at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia (D.Min) and Duke University (Ph.D.) and for five years served as pastor of the Windermere Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, North Carolina. He and his wife, The Rev. Katherine Morton Achtemeier, have three children.

Who Is Jesus Christ?

The Christology of the Nicene Creed

by Catherine J. S. Purves

A few years ago, while vacationing in Scotland, my family and I visited the legendary battlefield of Culloden. It was there in the spring of 1746 that the English armies defeated the combined clans of the Scots in a monumental and brutal battle which changed the course of Scotland's history. Culloden moor is a bleak and eerie place. Walking there among the huge slabs of stone that mark the mass graves of the fallen clans, it is easy to imagine the sounds of battle. It is not a romantic place, but a harsh and awesome place of struggle and sacrifice and commitment.

When we read the Nicene Creed we are, in a sense, revisiting a 4th century battlefield, not unlike Culloden. The now familiar words of this creed mark the sites of hard-fought and passionate theological battles in which the church struggled to express the true faith of the apostles. This doctrinal war began officially at the Council of Nicaea in the year 325. Called together by the Emperor Constantine, 300 bishops and hundreds of unofficial observers gathered to resolve a crucial issue which was threatening to split the church.

As a theological student at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, I remember well the lectures I heard on Nicene theology. They were given by the brothers Thomas and James Torrance, two formidable scholars of doctrine, who would swoop into the lecture hall, their academic robes flying, as a collective hush fell on the room. Though not in these exact words, this is the gist of what they were trying to teach us:

"You come to the study of theology, and indeed, you stand before God Almighty with many questions. *What* is the meaning of Jesus' life? *How* could he have been raised from the dead? *Why* did Christ have to die? *When* will he come again? But these are not the questions you should be asking! The prior and primary question for Christian faith is not "what?" or "how?" or "why?" or "when?" but "who?" *Who* is Jesus Christ? That is the question you must answer. That is the question the Council of Nicaea addressed."

1

You stand before God Almighty with many questions, but there is one question you must answer. That is the question the Council of Nicaea addressed.

See Study Guide, page 62.

The Bishops gathered in 325 ready to wage a war for the heart of the church, because they disagreed about the answer to that fundamental question, "Who is Jesus Christ?" Dissension had existed in the church as to the person and nature of Christ almost from the beginning, but in the 4th century, two champions arose, and rallied others to their theological standards: Arius and Athanasius.

The rallying cry of Arius was the oft-repeated slogan, "There was when He was not." The "He" is Christ, and by this Arius and his followers meant to imply that Christ was created by God, and, therefore, in some way different from God who is eternal. In their concern to preserve the primacy and unique holiness of God the Father, the Son's status and essential being are subtly diminished. He becomes less than God.

Athanasius and his supporters countered the claims of Arius with a term borrowed from Greek philosophy, *homoousios*, which means of one or the same being. They argued that the Son and the Father share the same divine nature. They are of one being, one essence. The Son is fully God. (1)

The violent clash of these two views was anything but a refined theological debate. The perspectives of Arius and Athanasius were completely irreconcilable, and while the victors at Nicaea would win the crown of orthodoxy, the defeated would be branded as heretics. As the bishops struggled to answer the question, "Who is Jesus Christ," a creedal statement incorporating the essential tenets of Athanasius began to emerge.

The original draft of the creed, which all of the bishops were required to sign, affirmed their belief in Jesus Christ as the only-begotten Son of the Father. The begotten nature of the Son was clearly defined. He was said to be "from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made." The *homoousios* of Athanasius was upheld, but more than that, the views of Arius were anathematized! The original creed concluded,

"But as for those who say, There was when He was not, and, Before being born He was not, and that He came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is from a different hypostasis or substance, or is created, or is subject to alteration or change—these the Catholic Church anathematizes." (2)

It was seen to be insufficient merely to assert the positive. The bishops felt compelled also to condemn the negative. (3) Therefore, the creed formed a clear and certain boundary for the Christological doctrine of the church. Both sides of that boundary were described, and the boundary became the solid and immovable safeguard of orthodoxy, of acceptable faith.

In the aftermath of battle, Arius and some of his supporters were exiled to Illyria, but Arianism, far from being eradicated, was thrust

underground. In some quarters, dissatisfaction with the Nicene solution quietly flourished. The years following Nicaea were marked by political intrigue, theological ambushes, banishments, and a disquieting ebb and flow of doctrine about Christ. Athanasius himself was exiled five times as the theological tug of war over the true nature of Christ continued. Finally, in 431 at the Council of Ephesus, the Nicene Creed was reaffirmed and the use of any other creed was banned. Twenty years later, the Council of Chalcedon gave final ratification to the revised Nicene Creed which appears in our *Book of Confessions*. The boundaries, it would appear, had been finally and firmly set.

These then are the parameters within which we seek to understand and live the faith. Jesus is God, one with the Father, always and forever, in the Spirit. Jesus is the Word of God, and so is united with the Father in will as well as substance. As the Word, the Son acted in creation. Through the incarnation, the Son became *fully* human, God with us. In his suffering and death on a cross, Jesus bore the consequence of sin for us as God. As resurrected Lord, Jesus lives for us and will speak God's final word of salvation and judgment. In the affirmations of the Nicene Creed, the borders of orthodox belief have been sharply drawn. The person of Jesus Christ is clearly known and worshiped as the only-begotten Son of the Father.

In our church, the notion of sharp boundaries which circumscribe and define the faith is often rejected. Boundaries are seen to be exclusive and limiting. Rather than being embraced as necessary safeguards, they are repudiated as abrasive barriers. It would appear that inclusivity is the overarching goal of our church, rather than truth. Many seem to believe that boundaries can no longer create a haven or a refuge, only a ghetto.

Yet, the Nicene Creed does create boundaries, and it calls upon us to guard those boundaries. There are wrong answers to the *Who* question, and those wrong answers will rob the church of its singular message of hope and redemption. If Jesus Christ is not truly, fully and eternally Son of God, as the Nicene Creed affirms, then there is no Good News, Jesus is not Lord, and reconciliation has not been accomplished through incarnation and atonement.

There are those who might argue that the battles of Nicaea belong to the ancient history of the church, that they are not our battles. (4) But when I recite the words of the Nicene Creed, I am consciously placing myself within the bounds of orthodoxy, and that puts me on the front lines, defending that boundary, asserting who Jesus Christ is and who he is not.

In the stiff and slightly archaic-sounding words of the Nicene Creed, we can still perceive the precise contours of that ancient battlefield, but I recognize it also as a strangely modern place. For the traditional understandings of the Lordship of Christ, the person and nature of Jesus, and his relationship with the Father are still under siege. The echoes of those ancient battles intermingle with the sounds

NOTES

1. In speaking of the significance of *homooousios*, Thomas Torrance writes, "It was the hinge upon which the whole Nicene Creed turned, and has remained the cardinal concept to which the Church has kept returning in theological renovation of its mind in the understanding and proclamation of the Gospel." Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 132.
2. J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 4th ed. (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1968) 232.
3. Paul in his letter to the Galatians sanctioned this kind of condemnation when he wrote, "As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!" (Gal 1:9).
4. See, however, Parker T. Williamson, *Standing Firm: Reclaiming Christian Faith in Times of Controversy* (Springfield, PA: PLC Publications, 1996), which argues that these are indeed our battles.
5. 1 Cor 4:1; 2 Tim 1:14.

of current doctrinal clashes, as the same theological struggles are undertaken again and again. Who is Jesus Christ?

Paul says that we are to be "stewards of God's mysteries," and that we must "Guard the good treasure entrusted to [us], with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us." (5) Whether we relish the battle or not, if we seek to be good stewards, not just of tradition, but of God's self-revelation, we will be thrust onto the front lines of doctrinal debate. We cannot dodge the *Who* question. As we seek to answer that question faithfully, we must rise to fight our own battles, and the words of Nicaea challenge us to articulate once again the faith of the apostles and to affirm with boldness the full Lordship of Jesus Christ:

"... the only-begotten Son of God,
begotten of the Father before all worlds,
God of God, Light of Light,
Very God of Very God, begotten, not made,
being of one substance with the Father ..."

The Need for the Jesus of History

The Christology of the Apostles' Creed

by George Hunsinger

Strictly speaking, the Apostles' Creed does not have a Christology, if Christology means a fully-thought-out presentation of Jesus Christ's saving significance. Our fuller contemporary doctrines of Jesus Christ need to be based on the Apostles' Creed and be consistent with it. But they are not contained in the creed, which has another function than to develop full statements of doctrine.

This essay reflects on some things that will be compatible with what the Apostles' Creed affirms about Jesus Christ, and what is implied for Christology by the affirmations of the Apostles' Creed.

A creed in general is a "rule of faith" (*regula fide*). That is how creeds were understood in the period when they were formed. The need for creeds arose because it became clear that the Bible in general, and the New Testament in particular, could be read in more than one way. Major controversies took place in the early church about the Trinity, the person of Jesus Christ and related questions. The creeds arose as a way of ruling certain things out and other things in. But they could not provide much more than a general framework. Creeds make a selection of topics designed to give us some kind of map for the Christian faith. They have a regulative function in orienting how we understand Scripture, worship and the sacraments in the life of the church.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son our Lord.

What does the Apostles' Creed say about Jesus Christ? It begins with the affirmation that Jesus Christ is God's only Son, our Lord. It says first who Jesus Christ is in relation to God, and then who he is in relation to us. To say that he is God's only Son is to affirm his uniqueness. His uniqueness is important for the church, because he is the object of our worship, the self-revelation of God and the Savior of the world. He could not be any of these things if he were not truly God. The affirmation that he is the only Son of God puts him in a class by himself. And then his role in relationship to us is specified as "the Lord," which is also a way of underscoring his deity. To say that he is the Lord is to ascribe a relationship of him to us and of us to him which is proper only to God. Only God is the Lord; only God is

2

The one who is coming again is the one who died that we might live. He is the judge. This is not terrifying news, it is good news!

See Study Guide, page 62.

sovereign; only God has this kind of authority and power over the world and especially over those who believe in Him.

A narrative of essentials

From then on, essentially the creed is not much more than a narrative. Why would the creed shift from these high affirmations of Jesus—being one with God and being Lord over us—to the mere recitation of a narrative? It's a very interesting move, and one worth pondering. Some people criticize the Apostles' Creed for not paying enough attention to the ministry of Jesus. Just because something is not stated does not mean it has been ruled out. The creed has a sense of what is essential to focus on. Clearly everything is leading toward the statements "crucified, dead, and buried," and "he descended into hell." Proportionally, the number of words allotted to Christ's death in this narrative is pretty high. Then, of course, the creed continues: "On the third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven." The life history of Jesus Christ finds its fulfillment in his death and resurrection. That does not mean his ministry is unimportant, but it does mean that we cannot abstract or detach his life history and resurrection, which together are the focal point of his saving significance.

His unique person is established not only with the affirmation of him as God's only Son, our Lord, but also with the next affirmations: "He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary." Who is this person? What is his identity among us? He is not only fully God, he is also fully human. The incarnation, with the double aspect "conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary," establishes and reaffirms both his unabridged deity and his equally unabridged humanity. That means we have a unique person who came to accomplish a unique work, and this work cannot be understood apart from the actual history in which it was enacted.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate.

In the subsequent catechisms it was taught that "he is our righteousness on account of his obedience." His life history is the history of his obedience which finds its fulfillment in his death and resurrection for our sakes. The statement that he "suffered under Pontius Pilate" has something to do with that obedience. The early Reformed theologians made a distinction between his "active obedience" and his "passive obedience." His active obedience was his perfect sinlessness, his fulfillment of the Law at all points. His passive obedience was his suffering the consequences of our failure to live as faithful people before God, his bearing the penalty of sin in our place. So the affirmation that he "suffered under Pontius Pilate" means, as Kierkegaard once said in a prayer, "You bore a whole life of suffering to save even me."

In other words, the life history of Jesus Christ is not excluded from the creed or, as is sometimes sarcastically said, "present only in a comma." That would be a rather unfortunate way of understanding

the creed in its relationship to Scripture, because the creed wants to indicate that this narrative line—which goes from his unique origin in history, as seen in his being conceived by the Holy Spirit and virgin birth, to his unique fulfillment in death and resurrection—is indispensable to anything else that can be said about his saving significance. The creed is insisting that here is the one thing that must never be lost, namely, this historical narrative, the course of his obedience from beginning to end, for our sake and in our place. It doesn't even say that he died for our sins! It just says "crucified, dead, and buried." But that is the essence of salvation history. Everything would be lost if we did not keep what we say about Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior rooted in his unique life history.

He descended into hell.

Calvin interpreted this statement as pertaining to Christ's dying on the cross—to his death itself—not to something that took place afterwards. Thinking it through, the moment of his abandonment by God on the cross—"he made him to be sin who knew no sin" (2 Cor 5:21)—is where his descent into hell really would have been experienced. What the creed says here finds its center in the cross. It brings out in unmistakable terms the whole terrible cost of God's love for us. It is an attempt to do justice to the abysmal consequences of sin. We have not taken either sin or grace seriously if we think we can dispense with this creedal affirmation or weaken it.

He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven.

Our Lord's resurrection again tells us about his relationship to God and his relationship to us. It tells us that God has vindicated his obedience and so gives us hope against hope. The New Testament says that God did not let his holy one see corruption. He did not let sin and death have the last word. Where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more. This is the great reversal in that history of salvation which is one long history of reversals. Humiliation and exaltation run as a pattern throughout this history—think of Abraham and Sarah, Joseph, David, Job and all the rest—but it ends in Christ's death and resurrection. Exalted from the grave, he reigns eternally as our righteousness and our life. All our narratives are included in his, whose narrative rules over all.

He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

We live "between the times." We live between his first and second advent. He encounters us here and now as the object of our gratitude and hope—of gratitude, because of his cross; and of hope, because of his resurrection. For his cross brings forgiveness of sins even as his resurrection brings eternal life in communion with God. At one point Paul in Romans 12 is thinking about Christians in affliction, and he tells them to remain steadfast in their hope, and to rejoice in it. This is not an obvious thing for them to do, but the object of gratitude and hope makes it possible: Jesus Christ, the one

For further reading

Hunsinger recommends:

For a discussion of The Apostles' Creed, *Dogmatics in Outline*, by Karl Barth (New York: Harper & Row, 1959).

For a discussion of The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, *The Trinitarian Faith*, by T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1988).

who died and rose and is coming again. The proclamation that he shall come to judge the living and the dead, although often portrayed in traditional theology and Western art as something terrifying, is primarily good news. For the one who is coming again is the one who died that we might live. He is the judge. This is not terrifying news, it is good news!

Our Lord's continuing presence to us between the times is eternally rooted in the life history that he accomplished there and then. His history is the primary place where our salvation was enacted. The creed focuses on that history, because our salvation has taken place in his life history before it ever takes place in ours. We are given a share by grace through faith in what took place there and then. That, I think, is the heart of the Christology of the Apostles' Creed. That is what is implied by focusing so single-mindedly on the central fact of our salvation, the unadorned narrative of his life, death, and resurrection.

Christ Jesus Our Salvation

The Christology of The Scots Confession

by Richard Paddon

The film opens with three people on a raised platform, surrounded by piles of branches. Onlookers are shaking their fists and shouting, but you can't make out what they are saying. As men with torches set fire to the branches, the moviegoer asks himself, "Are these Scottish followers of John Knox's reformation ... or are they English Catholics who acknowledge the Pope's authority?"

If you have seen the award-winning movie *Elizabeth*, you too may have wondered, "Who is being burned, and for what?"

The 15 tumultuous years that preceded Elizabeth's coronation in 1558, and the two years that followed, are the context of The Scots Confession, the first Reformed confession written in English. Luther's and Calvin's Reformation had already changed Christian practice and politics on the European continent when Knox and five others drafted this confession for church and country. They finished in four days, writing 25 paragraphs of various lengths which follow the subjects of The Apostles' Creed: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They discussed additional topics, including Scripture, Sacraments, Works Which Are Counted Good Before God, The True Kirk Determined from the False, Civil Authority and the Last Judgment. The document is grounded in the first Swiss Confession 24 years earlier, for Knox had been with Calvin in Geneva twice in the 1550s.

The setting of the confession

This document emerged out of civil war and the burning of Christian believers on both sides while Knox and others continued Calvin's Reformation with more than pamphlets and preaching. In 1546 armed men seized the castle at St. Andrews and ran their swords through corrupt and hated Cardinal Beaton (father of at least eight children), who earlier that year had presided over the hasty heresy trial and execution of yet another Scotsman preaching Reformation affirmations, particularly faith in Christ alone for salvation.

A year later the French recaptured the castle and Knox with it. He spent 19 months pulling an oar of a French ship before England intervened for his release.

3

The gospel is true for everyone—the good news of God's love for all, God acting in Christ Jesus as salvation for all the world.

See Study Guide, page 62.

In the 1550s the French intended to keep the Protestant heretic Elizabeth from following Mary Tudor to the English throne, thus securing it for Elizabeth's cousin, the Scottish Catholic Mary. But first, every attempt to reform the church in Scotland would have to be crushed.

Knox's sermons and tracts called for reforms in Christian practice and church structure, and because he was urging revolution he had to flee twice to Geneva. During his second stay he wrote "The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women," a diatribe directed against the teen-aged Mary, Queen of Scotland and France. Apparently Knox was blissfully unaware that her cousin Elizabeth, crowned about the time the tract would have reached England, might herself be enraged by Knox's "Blast." She refused safe passage through England for his return to Scotland.

Acknowledging the necessity of the Queen's support and the aristocracy with her, Knox modified his view of "monstrous" women monarchs and praised Elizabeth as like unto Deborah, prophet of Israel and leader of an army against King Jabin and General Sisera (Judges 4 and 5). This biblical connection soothed Elizabeth's anger and she did not oppose Reformation preaching and the Scots revolt against French occupation of lands on the north border of her realm.

At the first sign in 1559 of French troop movements, the men of Scotland took up arms, and the next year, with the timely arrival of soldiers sent by Elizabeth, the French were defeated. On July 6, 1560, they agreed to no further interference in Scotland, and six weeks later a Scottish Parliament set aside the jurisdiction of the Pope and approved The Scots Confession, a statement of faith to unify the country in a Reformed Church.

The writers intended to keep a strong link to the earlier confessions of the Reformed churches of Geneva and Zurich.

Long have we thirsted ... to make known to the world the sum of that doctrine which we profess and for which we have sustained infamy and danger. But such has been the rage of Satan against us, and against Jesus Christ's eternal verity, lately now born again among us, that to this day no time has been granted us to clear our consciences, as most gladly we would have done. For how we have been tossed until now the most part of Europe, we suppose, understands. (Introduction)

Christ Jesus in the confession

In the first nine chapters, the writers use the name "Christ Jesus" exclusively, placing the title "Christ" (Messiah) before the name "Jesus" for emphasis, as we do with "Professor Brown" or "Judge Green." In life we carry our given names before we begin to gather any titles to ourselves, as it was for Jesus. Jesus of Nazareth became Christ Jesus to the first believers.

He said to them, "Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."
(Mt 16:15-16)

Following short paragraphs on God, Creation and Original Sin, in Chapter 4 God's promise of salvation is recognized as a recurring theme of Scripture, "repeated and made clearer from time to time; it was embraced with joy and most constantly received by all the faithful ... onwards to the incarnation of Christ Jesus. All (we mean the believing fathers under the law) did see the joyful day of Christ Jesus, and did rejoice."

Then Chapter 5 affirms: "We most surely believe that God preserved, instructed, multiplied, honored, adorned, and called from death to life his Kirk in all ages since Adam until the coming of Christ Jesus in the flesh." This is a reference to the "communion of the saints." God's faithful people from every time and place are in Christ Jesus, the "cloud of witnesses" pictured in Hebrews 11.

Christ Jesus, divine and human

When the fullness of time came God sent his Son, his eternal wisdom, the substance of his own glory, into this world ... Emmanuel, true God and true man, two perfect natures united and joined in one person. (Chapter 6)

Christ Jesus, God's wisdom

Simon Peter and numerous New Testament witnesses declare that Christ Jesus is Son of God. Further, Christ Jesus is "eternal wisdom" by which we know God. 1 Corinthians 1:30 says, "God is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption."

Nothing here of Sophia, a wisdom alongside or other than Christ Jesus! Rather, for knowledge we are to learn from Christ Jesus. For direction, we are to look to Christ Jesus. For guidance, we are to follow Christ Jesus. For righteous living and spiritual growth, we are to make Christ Jesus our spiritual trainer.

Christ Jesus, God's glory

Christ Jesus is also God's "glory," the word used in Scripture for the character of God, the essence of God, what Moses wanted God to reveal but God would not (Ex 33:17ff). How do we know God? "Whoever has seen me," Jesus declared, "has seen the Father ... Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (John 14:9, 11).

Two natures in one person

Christ Jesus is to be appreciated as fully human and fully divine, while our tendency is to favor one side or the other. Much is at stake here for us in Christian living, as Gregory Wolfe notes, "When emphasis is placed on the divine at the expense of the human, Jesus

becomes an ethereal authority figure remote from earthly life and experience. When he is thought of as merely human he becomes nothing more than a superior social worker or a popular guru."

Christ Jesus our salvation

We know God only and completely in Christ Jesus. We acknowledge and confess that this wonderful union between the Godhead and the humanity in Christ Jesus did arise from the eternal and immutable decree of God from which all our salvation springs and depends. (Chapter 7)

Election—God choosing us—is the Reformed way of saying "grace alone," being made right with God by grace through faith, "without respect to any merit proceeding from us" (Chapter 12). Election assures us that what God does in mercy we cannot undo, an affirmation Christians make looking back, praising God for what God has done, thankful that nothing depends on us.

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew
He moved my soul to seek him, seeking me.
It was not I that found, O Savior true;
No, I was found of Thee!

(George Chadwick in the Presbyterian Hymnbook, 1955)

There is no fate, chance or luck in the Bible, only God's connection to the lives of every person as so magnificently described in Psalm 139. The universe in all its details is subject to God's will, as celebrated especially in Psalm 104.

God promises our salvation in Christ Jesus and we trust that promise, receiving salvation as God's gift. Our faith is saving faith because it trusts the saving promise that Christ Jesus is the designated connection between us and the heavenly Father.

Christ Jesus, God on the cross

God alone is able to save us from sin and death. In mercy, God chose us for salvation which is ours by trust in Christ Jesus.

That same eternal God and Father, who by grace alone chose us in his Son Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world was laid, appointed him to be our head, our brother, our pastor, and the great bishop of our souls ... further, it behooved the Messiah and Redeemer to be true God and true man, because he was able to undergo the punishment of our transgressions and to present himself in the presence of his Father's judgment, as in our stead, to suffer for our transgression and disobedience, and by death to overcome him that was the author of death. (Chapter 8)

God on the cross accomplishes our salvation, though how God is both Forgiving Father and Suffering Savior is a great mystery with

which the church has grappled for centuries. One of the stanzas of the hymn, "Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed" has been altered in almost all 20th century hymnals, obscuring God in Christ Jesus. The third verse we usually sing:

Well might the sun in darkness hide, and shut its glories in,
When Christ, the great Redeemer died for human creatures' sin.
Here is the second line Isaac Watts wrote:
When God, the mighty Maker died for man the creature's sin.

Christ Jesus, our head and brother

The church is described as the body of Christ in the New Testament, and Christ is the head of the body, highlighting the direction, guidance and authority of Christ in the life of the church. Yet Christ also supports and encourages us in every circumstance because he is with us in relationship like the closest family member. We sing with confidence and thanks, "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear."

Christ Jesus, our pastor and the bishop of our souls

Believers in Scotland were leaving the stability and structure of the church into which they and infants for centuries before them had been baptized. Who then will be their security for salvation—giving assurance of sins forgiven—if not the parish priest and the bishop? The confession declares Christ Jesus is the shepherd of the flock—their pastor—and he is bishop, not of a geographic area but of their souls. Those who trust Christ Jesus for salvation can be confident that he is their guardian and guarantor.

Christ Jesus our only Mediator

We are not afraid to call God our Father, not so much because he has created us, which we have in common with the reprobate, as because he has given unto us his only Son to be our brother, and given us grace to acknowledge and embrace him as our only Mediator. (Chapter 8)

And there it is, that phrase that offends so many: our only Mediator. In our day we have the pervasive habit of using qualifying phrases—"It seems to me ..." or "I believe that ..." or "I've found this to be true for me ..."—to show our tolerance and our sensitivity to the opinions of others. But when connected to Scripture declaring Christ Jesus to be the one through whom we are reconciled to God, there lurks in these qualifiers the assertion that this can be held as true only "for me," but perhaps not for you, and certainly not for all people.

Yet the gospel we read in the New Testament expects to be believed as true for everyone, whatever gaps there may be in our full grasp of gospel truth. The writers announce good news of God's love for all, God acting in Christ Jesus as salvation for all the world.

For further study about the confessions, Paddon recommends "To All Generations," a 40-minute video that gives a background for each of the documents in the *Book of Confessions*. For ordering information: Interlink Media
250 Kings Highway East
Haddonfield, NJ 08033
email: interlink@p3.net
(\$25 plus postage).

This all-encompassing Christian affirmation is grounded in a true and particular faith. From the beginning God chooses, calls and sends particular people, "but when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son" (Gal 4:4).

Because the Godhead alone could not suffer death, and neither could manhood overcome death, he joined both together in one person, that the weakness of one should suffer and be subject to death—which we had deserved—and the infinite and invincible power of the other, that is, of the Godhead, should triumph, and purchase for us life, liberty, and perpetual victory. So we confess, and most undoubtedly believe. (Chapter 8)

Because salvation is from God in Christ Jesus we can be confident that our trust is well placed, not in ourselves but in him. God's promises are the foundation of assurance of faith, that joy-filled and certain confidence that the love and mercy of God are ours in Christ Jesus, now and forever.

Jesus Christ Our Only Comfort

The Christology of The Heidelberg Catechism

by Karen Petersen Finch

The Heidelberg Catechism is one of the best-loved tools ever created for instructing Christians in the faith. (1) It was born in the 1560s, when Lutherans and Calvinists sought to clarify their Christian proclamation vis-à-vis one another and in response to Roman Catholicism. For 400 years it has been training Christians in both Lutheran and Reformed churches (like your own), focusing on the fundamental truth of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

What makes the Heidelberg Catechism unique among the faith statements in our Presbyterian *Book of Confessions* is its experiential approach. The authors of the Heidelberg are interested in making a thorough presentation of Christian doctrine that is directed not only at the head, but also at the heart and the experience. Their greatest concern is to demonstrate that the truth of salvation we find in the Scripture is, in the language of the believer, “for me.” For example, while examining the separate articles of the Apostles’ Creed in detail, the catechism asks us: “What advantage comes from acknowledging God’s creation and providence?” (Q.28) “What comfort does ‘the resurrection of the body’ give you?” (Q. 57) And finally: “But how does it help you that you believe all this?” (Q. 59)

In Heidelberg language, the chief benefit for those who believe the gospel is an experience called “comfort.” This “comfort” is not the absence of distress, for the catechism is very honest about the level of suffering we may encounter in this earthly life. To define comfort in Heidelberg terms is to dive headfirst into the deep end of the catechism, which is its Christology. That Jesus Christ is the source and foundation of Christian comfort is evident from the very first word we hear: “What is your only comfort, in life and in death?” “That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ ...” (2)

Who is this Jesus Christ, and why is he our only comfort? We can be sure that for the writers of the Heidelberg the answer to this question is not a matter for guesswork. The person and work of Jesus Christ are faithfully revealed in the biblical record. *With regard to what he has done, Jesus is our Righteousness; with regard to his place in our lives, he is our Lord; with regard to our future life both on earth and in eternity, Jesus is our Pledge.* In all of these claims the goal of the catechism is not simply that we understand the biblical

4

That Jesus Christ is the source and foundation of Christian comfort is evident from the very first word we hear in this catechism: “What is your only comfort, in life and in death?”
“That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ ...”

See Study Guide, page 63.

portrait of Jesus Christ and the teaching tradition of the church concerning him, but that we experience him as our righteousness, our Lord and our pledge in a vital, daily way.

Jesus Christ our Righteousness

The first and second sections of the catechism (Q. 3-19) introduce us to Jesus Christ by identifying him as the solution to a particular problem: the misery of humankind in isolation from God. (3) How did this misery begin? Question 6 tells us that "God created [human beings] good and in his image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that he might rightly know God his Creator, love him with his whole heart, and live with him in eternal blessedness, praising and glorifying him." The word "righteousness" appears over and over again in these sections, and theologian Karl Barth has interpreted it for modern ears. According to Barth, "righteousness" in Heidelberg terms is not primarily an inner moral quality. It is a picture of the relationship that Adam and Eve enjoyed with God before they fell into sin. "With his creation," Barth writes, "[a human being] is given a right, the right as the child of God to exist before and with God." (4) Once the law of God (Q. 4) is broken, humanity has violated both its own rights and God's right order as well, and is therefore lost. "This lostness," Barth concludes, "is man's misery." (5)

Misery is a good word for the situation that we see in questions 3-12. How can human beings satisfy the righteousness of God by restoring the right order of creation that was broken? How can we regain our own rights before God, above all the freedom to be God's children? The situation appears hopeless, until the tide begins to turn in Question 15:

Question: Then what kind of mediator and redeemer shall we seek?

Answer: One who is a true and righteous [human being] and yet more powerful than all creatures, that is, one who is at the same time true God.

By taking the penalty of unrighteousness upon him in death (Q.16) Jesus Christ has "restored the confused order between God and [human beings]." (6) Yet how has he done this? Not simply by doing something for us, but by being Someone for us: fully human and fully divine, being in his person the reconciliation of God and humanity. Through him it is possible to live in Eden fellowship with God again, not by earning our way back to paradise, but by faith. As the believer says in Question 60, "... The satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ alone are my righteousness before God, and ... I can accept it and make it mine in no other way than by faith alone."

This way of describing the person and work of Jesus Christ through the word "righteousness" has two important implications. First, before we can grasp the comfort of what God has done for us in Jesus, we must first acknowledge the fact of sin—which is alienation from God—and the misery that sin brings. Comfort only has meaning in the context of discomfort. Second, once we have heard of this

comfort, the catechism does not intend that it stay a distant possibility in our minds. Rather we may experience it as a new relationship with God. "God has become our Father through Christ," the catechism teaches, and because of this, the believer can rest in "childlike reverence and trust." (7)

Jesus Christ our Lord

A second image for Jesus Christ that we find in the Heidelberg Catechism is the image of "Lord." To say that Christ is Lord is to proclaim that the resurrected Jesus now sits at the right hand of God as "Head of the Church, through whom the Father governs all things." (8) The Heidelberg also speaks in this biblical way, but with an emphasis that is all its own. Here the image of Lord is not so much an image of governance as of ownership.

Question 34. Why do you call him OUR LORD?

Answer. Because, not with gold or silver but at the cost of his blood, he has redeemed us body and soul from sin and all the dominion of the devil, and has bought us for his very own.

Why does the Heidelberg speak in this way? First, it uses the language of an economic transaction to emphasize that Jesus' work on our behalf is final and decisive, a "done deal." Secondly, the language of ownership declares that Jesus Christ has a claim on us that no one else can make, because of what he did for us in his death and resurrection. In other words, because he is our Righteousness, he is therefore our Lord—and that relationship is exclusive. We belong to him, body and soul, completely.

In 1934, in the city of Barmen-Wuppertal, Germany, Lutheran and Reformed Christians gathered to resist the infiltration of Nazi politics into the Christian message. They sought language that would tell the world of their allegiance to Jesus Christ and him alone—words of courage and comfort. They found such language in the Heidelberg Catechism. "We reject the false doctrine," they declared, "as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other Lords." (9) Raised as they were on the Heidelberg Catechism, these believers knew that the Lordship of Jesus was not just a theological claim, but an experience as well. To belong to Jesus Christ is our deepest comfort, in life and even in the presence of death.

Jesus Christ our Pledge

With this third image, we find that the Heidelberg catechism's view of Jesus Christ covers all three human dimensions of time: past, present and future. Jesus has become our righteousness in his decisive work in the past, and because of this work he is our Lord in the present. Yet our study is not complete without a glance at a third image in the catechism, one that presents Jesus Christ as our pattern for the future. Christ is our "pledge," or promise: because he has stood in our place, we will someday stand in his. (10)

For further reading

Finch recommends:

The Heidelberg Catechism for Today, by Karl Barth (Shirley C. Guthrie, translator), (London: Epworth Press, 1964).

Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions, by Jack Rogers (Westminster Press, 1985) pages 96-115.

NOTES

1. A catechism is a series of questions and answers, designed for teaching children, training church leaders and providing the backbone for a full year's preaching.
2. *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Part I: Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 1997), 4.001.
3. *Book of Confessions*, 4.003-4.019.
4. Karl Barth (Shirley C. Guthrie, trans.), *The Heidelberg Catechism for Today* (London: Epworth Press, 1964), 41. This book is short and very accessible for lay readers.
5. Ibid.
6. Barth, 32.
7. *Book of Confessions*, 4.120.
8. *Book of Confessions*, 4.050.
9. *Book of Confessions*, The Theological Declaration of Barmen, 8.15.
10. See Barth, 39.
11. *Book of Confessions*, 4.086.
12. Gnosticism was a religious worldview that flourished in the ancient world. Christian Gnostics adopted the figure of Jesus Christ but separated him from his Jewish antecedents and from the faith of the early church, perceiving him as a revealer of secret truths about the nature of the universe.
13. *Book of Confessions*, 4.001.

This future orientation is most obvious in questions that speak of Christ's resurrection and his ascension into heaven. Question 49 declares that "we have our flesh in heaven [Jesus] as a sure pledge that he as the Head will also take us, his members, up to himself." In other words, the rising and reigning of Jesus are a sign of what the believer can expect after death. Yet what is not so obvious is the Heidelberg's conviction that this Christ-shaped future begins today. For example, Question 31 outlines the three-fold nature of Christ's work as prophet, priest and king. Surprisingly, the next question is "But why are you called a Christian?"

A. Because through faith I share in Christ and thus in his anointing [prophet], so that I may confess his name, offer myself a living sacrifice of gratitude to him [priest], and fight against sin and the devil with a free and good conscience throughout this life and hereafter rule with him in eternity over all creatures [king].

We do not have to wait until after death to stand in the place of Jesus. By the power of the Holy Spirit conforming us to his image, we can live the Christ-shaped life today. (11) In this way the image of Jesus Christ as our pledge describes the breaking of the future into the present. We experience this future not as distant hope, but as a hope that gives shape to our everyday lives.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the Christology of the Heidelberg Catechism unfolds as a series of biblical truths designed not simply to stay in the mind, but to be felt and experienced in daily life. Jesus Christ is our Righteousness, so that we may experience an intimate relationship with the God who has created us. Christ is our Lord, so that we may know the power and security of belonging to him. Finally, Jesus is our Pledge that we might be assured of a new life that has a shape and a destination. Therefore the total proclamation of the Heidelberg Catechism concerning Jesus Christ is one of comfort, where comfort is understood as a blend of joy, security, power and hope.

This portrait of Jesus has its word to say to believers in our time and context. Every generation faces the gnostic (12) impulse that would remove Jesus Christ from his biblical moorings and recreate him in a way that will appeal to the spirit of the age. This mentality assumes that the most comforting Jesus is the Jesus whom we design ourselves. For the authors of the Heidelberg, however, it is the Jesus of revelation that is our only comfort, because he is able to be "far more than all we can ask or imagine" (Eph 3:20). Even so, the Heidelberg Catechism reminds us that the revelation concerning Jesus Christ cannot be allowed to remain in the onion-skin pages of a Bible. Jesus Christ is a living Lord, at work in our churches, our neighborhoods and our private lives, and he must be experienced as such if he is to be Lord at all. Only with this experience as our starting point will we find ourselves "wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him." (13)

Christ, Our Only Mediator and Savior The Christology of The Second Helvetic Confession

by Sherron Kay George

Is Christology relevant today? As part of an assignment in a class I taught at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Jesse Alexander engaged four students at the West Mall of the University of Texas in conversations about God. None were church attenders, but three had a trinitarian understanding of God and considered Jesus Christ a historical figure, “the Savior, a friend, and the Son of God,” although they had confused notions about his two natures. The fourth student was “fascinated by Jesus of Nazareth,” and is “even writing a story that has Jesus as one of the main characters,” but felt no need for a savior or Christianity. It is to this generation, disillusioned with the church but interested in Christ, that we must communicate.

Historical context

The festive liturgical celebration of the Formula of Agreement between Lutheran and Reformed/Presbyterian churches in the United States (1) is cause for great rejoicing because one of the painful consequences of the Protestant Reformation and ensuing centuries of Protestantism is the need for reconciliation between Christians. The Second Helvetic or “Swiss” Confession was an early attempt at conciliation. The debate between high German Lutherans and the Reform movement was so great that Frederick the Elector, governor of the Palatinate, was facing a heresy trial. The Heidelberg Catechism, which he commissioned two young theologians to write with the intent of appealing to both groups, was too radically reformed for the Lutherans. The Reformed believers in Heidelberg appealed to the experienced Swiss pastor-theologian Heinrich Bullinger for support in Frederick’s defense. Barriers between faith traditions, debate over confessional standards and symbols of unity, and heresy accusations are still with us.

One of the fascinating aspects of the Second Helvetic Confession, the longest document in *The Book of Confessions*, is that it was produced by a sole author. Bullinger, with 40 years of pastoral experience as the successor of his mentor, Ulrich Zwingli, at the Great Minster in Zurich, “had seen three generations of Reformers develop.” (2) Widely respected for his brilliant sermons, wise

5

The most crucial issue we will face in the 21st century will be the singularity and uniqueness of Jesus Christ in a world of religious pluralism.

See Study Guide, page 63.

counseling and serious academic contributions, Bullinger was the primary author of the First Helvetic Confession (1536) which, though rejected by Luther and not widely circulated, served as the basis for the Second Confession which Bullinger wrote in 1561 and planned to attach to his will as a legacy. When he received the urgent request from Frederick in 1566, he decided that the time was propitious and that his personal statement of faith might serve to demonstrate at the upcoming Diet of the Empire “that the theology that the church in his domains had espoused was not a departure from the authentic tradition of the church.” (3)

Bullinger’s personal confession, which resulted in Frederick’s exoneration and later was adopted by many Reformed churches in Europe, reminds us of the importance of our own theological syntheses. Presbyterian pastors write a one-page confessional statement as they enter a presbytery. That is not “jumping through the hoops” and perhaps should be followed by a 30-chapter statement before retirement!

How Christology matters

The Second Helvetic Confession is divided into two parts. Chapters 1-16 deal with doctrine, and Chapters 17-30 focus on church, ministry and sacraments. There is something unsettling about this division, and though our organization into departments at seminaries mirrors it, we constantly struggle to achieve integration because theology without practices, as well as practices without theology, are equally dangerous. Christology matters.

Jack Rogers affirms that we have a *Book of Confessions* because

“We Presbyterians believe in doctrine ... All our doctrines center in the person and work of Jesus Christ ... Believing that Jesus Christ is central unites us with all other Christians, because this is the distinctive doctrine of the Christian faith” (see *Book of Confessions* 5.131).

This centrality is obvious in shorter statements like the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds. It is also true in the Second Helvetic Confession.

Christology is introduced in Chapter 3 on the Trinity. The approach reaffirms the results of the first four ecumenical councils at Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon. After five centuries of debate, the church had clarified two foundational issues: 1) the Trinity—one God in three equal and eternal but distinct persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and 2) the two natures of Christ, fully human and fully divine, which must neither be confused nor divided.

The 16th century Reformation confessions move on to Christological concerns which come from the disagreement with Roman Catholic doctrine and practice. Chapter 4 speaks to one of the disputes with the Roman Catholic Church, the use of images of Christ and the saints. The purpose of assuming a human nature was not “to provide a model for carvers and painters” (5.020). This reactionary

position has influenced many Protestant groups to varying degrees up to the present, but has largely been tempered as the history of religious art proves. Today some contemporary megachurches even strip worship venues of all religious symbols and pipe organs to appeal to the unchurched, and are replacing them with high tech images and instruments.

The dominant Christological title of the Second Helvetic Confession is introduced in Chapter 5, Christ the *only Mediator* between God and humanity (I Tim 2:5).

"In all crises and trials of our life we call upon [God] alone, and that by the mediation of our only mediator and intercessor, Jesus Christ" (5.024). "For God and Christ the Mediator are sufficient for us" (5.025).

Obviously the role of Mary and the saints in Catholicism is a burning issue. It is interesting how the contours of our theology and our selection and use of biblical texts are determined by the current abuses in doctrine and practice. Such is the contextual nature of all theology. There is no other way to construct it. In addition to 1 Timothy 2:5, Chapter 5 cites another key text that will be repeated, Acts 4:12, "there is no other name under heaven ... by which we must be saved," a text widely debated today.

After Chapters 6-10 deal with providence, creation, sin, free will, and election in Christ, the central and fullest Christological development comes in Chapter 11. The opening statement is extremely significant, powerful and relevant:

"We further believe and teach that the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, was predestined or foreordained from eternity by the Father to be the Savior of the world" (5.062). First there is an exposition of the two natures of Christ which "are united or joined together in one person—the properties of the natures being unimpaired and permanent" (5.066).

At the level of theological discourse, this doctrine seems firmly established, but the controversy continues. Latin American theologians like Jon Sobrino contend that the Western church has done Christology "from above" with emphasis on the divine and on a powerful Christ for the powerful. In *Christology at the Crossroads* (Orbis 1978) and *Jesus in Latin America* (Orbis 1988), he shows the importance of the historical Jesus in Latin American Christology "from below," Jesus Christ as a suffering servant for the oppressed.

While Chapter 11 deals with "the mystery of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ," there is no real concern for the life and earthly ministry of Jesus, but a poignant rehearsal of the suffering, resurrection, ascension, and return of Christ. It emphasizes corporeality—"real bodily pain," "he retained his true body," "in his same flesh ascended," and Christ is bodily at the right hand of God. Neither is there a discussion of the nature of the atonement, but of the results:

For further reading

George recommends:

Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions, by Jack Rogers (Westminster Press, 1985).

“... our Lord reconciled all the faithful to the heavenly Father, made expiation for sins, disarmed death, overcame damnation and hell, and by his resurrection from the dead brought again and restored life and immortality” (5.076).

In resonance with the opening statement, the striking emphasis of the chapter and of this Confession is “this Jesus Christ our Lord is the unique and eternal Savior of the human race, and thus of the whole world” (5.077). This becomes a repeated motif: “Jesus Christ is the sole Redeemer and Savior of the world, the King and High Priest, the true and awaited Messiah” (5.077). Not only is Christ the sole Mediator, but salvation is in Christ alone.

Chapter 13 deals with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, “the glad and joyous news ... that God has now performed what he promised from the beginning of the world, and has sent, nay more, has given us his only Son and in him reconciliation with the Father, the remission of sins, all fulness and everlasting life” (5.089). The gospel of the singular Christ is universal, “an access to God is open to all sinners” (5.102).

The central issue for the future church

The theme of our Lord’s uniqueness and singularity is repeated throughout Chapter 15 on justification. We are justified “solely by the grace of Christ,” “only on account of Christ,” “by faith alone in Christ,” “we attribute it wholly to the grace of God in Christ,” the pious “trust in Christ alone.” If the 20th century’s Christological controversies have centered on atonement theories and the historical Jesus, I believe that the most crucial issue as we enter the next century will be the singularity and uniqueness of Jesus Christ in a world of religious pluralism. The greatest challenge will be to affirm and proclaim the uniqueness of Christ in postmodern terms and at the same time maintain respectful dialogue with other religions. With people of many faiths and traditional religions, we share a belief in a Supreme God, and we join in common mission activities with all who uphold the values of God’s realm, but the particularity of Christ is a defining boundary in our faith identity. Dialogue presupposes the clear articulation of a faith commitment from each participant, and Christ the Savior is the unique and central element of the Reformed tradition.

The title of Chapter 17, “Of the Catholic and Holy Church of God, and of the One Only Head of the Church” reveals the continuation of the singularity focus in opposition to the papacy. The universal church has “one mediator,” “one Shepherd of the whole flock, one Head of this body” (5.126). There is “one fellowship, one salvation in the one Messiah” (5.129). We “do not seek righteousness and life outside Christ and faith in him” (5.135). Christ and the church are closely connected, and “there is no certain salvation outside Christ, who offers himself to be enjoyed by the elect in the Church” (5.136). The “certain” here reminds me of the World Council of Churches’

affirmation from the San Antonio Conference: "We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ." (4)

Chapter 18 affirms that, in contrast to the "power and duty" of human ministers, there is "another power that is pure and absolute, which is called the power of right. According to this power all things in the whole world are subject to Christ, who is Lord of all" (5.157).

Moving in the next chapter to the sacraments, differences with the Roman church continue, along with the Christo-centric singularity. "... Christ, the only Mediator and Savior of the faithful, is the chief thing and very substance of the Sacraments" (5.176). The elements are "symbols" through which we make "a faithful memorial to the Lord's death" and "spiritually partake" of Christ by the Holy Spirit who lifts us up to Christ at the right hand of God. Although absent in body, Christ is truly "present with us, not corporeally, but spiritually" in this "unbloody and mystical Supper" (5.205).

The closing prayer fittingly ends the Christo-centric confession: "We beseech God, our most merciful Father in heaven, that He will bless the rulers of the people, and us, and His whole people, through Jesus Christ, our only Lord and Savior; to whom be praise and glory and thanksgiving, for all ages. Amen" (5.260).

NOTES

1. The Formula of Agreement became official in the PC(USA) on June 17, 1998 at the 210th General Assembly following the affirmative vote of a majority of presbyteries. It is available from the Presbyterian Distribution Service (800-524-2612). It is based on, *A Common Calling*, Keith F. Nickle and Timothy F. Lull, ed., also available though PDS.
2. *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), 119.
3. Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought: From the Protestant Reformation to the Twentieth Century* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), vol. 3:249.
4. Frederick R. Wilson, ed., *The San Antonio Report* (Geneva: WCC, 1990), 23.

6*

Jesus Christ is God at work in every aspect of our lives. In an era in which people are increasingly drawn toward the idea that everything is relative, the Westminster Confession conveys the church's witness that in Jesus Christ, God has done something of spectacular importance for us.

** The Westminster Confession of Faith also includes documents 7 and 8 in the Book of Confessions: The Shorter Catechism and The Larger Catechism.*

See Study Guide, page 63.

The Witness to Jesus Christ

The Christology of The Westminster Confession of Faith

by Richard A. Ray

I have grown to love the Westminster Confession of Faith. That does not mean that this is in every way a comfortable relationship. Perhaps it is much like the admiration one has for an outspoken, somewhat formal old friend. He may talk in ways that seem to be out of fashion. Some people have stopped listening. But then one day, you pause; you listen again. And this time you hear things that you never heard before. This old friend has some very important things to say.

My relationship with this confession has been a steadily maturing thing. At first I picked up parts of it. I could see the value in the way it said particular things here and there. And then I noticed its problems. It could make glaring contradictions. And it could go to almost frustrating extremes.

What helped was that I got to understand it better. I learned more about the time in which it was written. I read about its authors. And I paid special attention to the sources which they apparently read. Walking in their shoes, I came to see the marvel in the ways in which they had addressed the challenge of their times. In fact, I have come to feel that they still have much to teach us about the Christian faith today.

Historical background

Written in the 1640s, the Westminster Confession was ratified by Parliament without ever having been granted official church approval in England. It was, however, recognized by the church in Scotland, and in time it was carried by Scottish emigrants throughout the world. Adopted in 1792 by American Presbyterians, it became part of the DNA of church life in this country. Thousands of ministers and elders have been guided by it.

All of the provisions in this confession grow out of its central witness to Jesus Christ. Everything that it says is rooted in him. Even the statements that may seem remote are based on the conviction that God truly did become incarnate in Christ. And the statements that seem to challenge our thinking the most reflect the confession's basic

assertion that in Christ, God makes our ways of seeing the world new. Jesus Christ cannot be contained in our understanding of ourselves, and thus we should not be put off if the confession presses the boundaries of logic here and there. This confession cannot contain the power of God's incarnation in Christ, and this power sometimes leads it into paradoxes it cannot control. It has down-right risky edges at places, and the truth is that even in its form it bears witness to the unique, unmanageable force of the incarnation in Christ.

Beginning with Scripture

One of the most provocative things about this document is expressed in the part that people have treasured the most. It opens with a chapter on the authority of Scripture. And after going into this issue in epoch-making ways—moving beyond, for instance, the Second Helvetic Confession's shorter text, with its explicit enumeration of the books in the canon—it quickly proceeds to test this ground upon which it builds its case. It moves confidently into two of the most perplexing declarations. The first focuses on the decrees of God, double predestination, to put it into our terms; and the second is the two covenants, the covenant of works with Adam and the covenant of grace through Christ.

The essential enigma here is that one is hard put to find either of these declarations as literal and explicit in Scripture as the confession implies. The term "decree" is rarely used in the Old Testament, certainly not in this way. Then, it never appears in the New Testament at all. Covenant, on the other hand, is a central biblical theme. Even so, it has no exact connection with Adam and Eve whatsoever.

Understandably, sympathetic but critical readers have not hesitated to heap scorn on the confession's general outline. First, they have observed that creeds ought to begin with what is most important, Almighty God himself, not the Scriptures. They point to the Nicene Creed, Apostles' Creed, Scots Confession, etc. as examples of what is proper form. Second, they sense a problem with the distancing terminology, the apparent rigidity and the resulting harsh portrait of God that seems expressed in the idea of eternal decrees. Third, they feel that this entire discussion of covenants, let alone the absence of one with Adam, provides a misleading perspective. It makes God sound as though he is one who can make deals but who cannot really love from an overflowing heart.

This admittedly seems to be tough. Nevertheless, there is more involved at this point. One should not underestimate the blizzard of ideas swirling through England at the time. Many things had been happening. Philosophers were absorbed with the promise of the mind's own rational capacities. Scientists were reaping rewards from the empirical way to the truth. New patterns of trade and commerce were pressing changes into society. And entrepreneurs as well as statesmen had a fuller appreciation for the protective, dignifying role of legal contracts. In addition, independent, thoughtful clergy and

laity were finding more guidance from Scripture than anyone had thought possible.

There is no question that the authors of the Westminster Confession decided to take a definite stand here. They affirmed that while observation can teach us many enlightening things, the only reliable way to a saving knowledge of God lies through Scripture. They thus established a principle which had profound implications. For instance, they held that all church controversies should be resolved by the leadership of God's Spirit through Scripture. And they implied that no matter how far away God might seem to us, we have his own plan to help us. Scripture could, with the help of the Holy Spirit, be our guide. By what is expressly said there, or by what could be drawn from it by "good and necessary consequence," it could lead us to the truth. Therefore, we have this resource which is astonishingly important and unique.

What the authors of the confession did was to draw together their conviction about the source of Scripture with an affirmation of the Spirit's continued enlivening work with us. This was no slight thing. For in taking this step they sealed the promise of Scripture reading into one of our historic confessions. They thus elevated, we should note, the significance of Scripture reading to creedal status. This tells us that only the Scripture can guide us into a heart's knowledge of God. What this surely implies is that all Christian churches should provide regular Bible study opportunities for everyone. By introducing it this way, the confession leads us to face the question, have we done all that we could to invite others to regular Bible study and to participate in it ourselves?

God's decree

It is the next question, however, which becomes even more critical for us. As the confession moves toward its witness to Christ, it recognizes the Trinity in Chapter 2 and then proceeds quickly to the issues of the dual decrees and the two-fold covenants. How could this be? Such ideas are not in the Bible! It would help here to broaden our horizons a little. Historically, church authorities have not hesitated to promulgate authoritative statements. Sometimes they were known as *decretals* or decrees. They could be amazingly specific. Sometimes they concerned church laws and even such issues as the things which guide us toward heaven or hell. In the context of this concern about the authority of the church's decrees, the Westminster Confession affirms that God alone makes the ultimate decisions. Everything is rooted in his will. God's authority thus differs from anyone else's authority. It is not held back behind the boundaries of heaven, earth, or hell. It surpasses the despair of human sin and the temptation of human achievement. And it says this at an emphatic, early place. By establishing this principle in Chapter 3, the authors of the confession anchored all that follows in rock-solid security. It is anchored in God's sovereign will. The Westminster Confession thus says that God's commitment to our salvation is not conditional upon our

performance or our success. It is beyond time. It precedes history, and it reaches beyond history. God's personal will holds us securely, leading us into the power of Jesus Christ. Therefore, we can live joyfully and thankfully. Our capacity to forgive others is dramatically enhanced. Thus the confession attests that there is an enduring, objective origin for our faith. It says that Christ has come into our lives to carry out the Father's will. And the implications of this in dealing with the relativism of today are especially important.

In this way, the confession contrasts the absolutely reliable love of God against all of the changing conditions in our lives. It does this by saying as we read in Chapter 8, "Of Christ the Mediator," that Christ has been put in charge. He is our prophet in that he clarifies what we are to do. He is our priest in that he is the living bond between ourselves and the Father. He is our king because he will carry out the Father's purposes. He is the Savior of his church in that God's own power to protect flows from him. And he is the judge in that his unprecedented righteous and living truth has become the standard of holiness by which we must live, through which we are transformed, and by which we are judged. And Chapters 13-17, from justification through repentance, indicates step by step that Christ's cleansing power really does work in human life. Each of these phrases combines with the others to say that Jesus Christ is God at work in every aspect of our lives. By his incarnation in Christ, God overcomes all that lies unshaped by his love.

Therefore, in this term "decree" the confession delivers an unmistakable emphasis on the objective, enduring quality of God's incarnation in Christ. It declares that Christ's work will never fail. It is no accident of history. On the contrary, it is rooted in God the Father's eternal will. In this way the confession also says that Jesus Christ has the spiritual grace to penetrate all emotional and psychological barriers in our lives. Paradoxically, while God's grace does not invalidate human freedom, it certainly is not held beyond it. And—especially important for evangelistic outreach—God's grace is not held back by those who do not seem to come to faith. His love is greater than that and is not held hostage to our times of blindness and rebellion.

I appreciate the vigor with which the confession comes to this point in the doctrine of the eternal nature of God's incarnation in Christ. Even so, the forcefulness can be easily misunderstood. If one isolates this chapter from the others, it would appear that it overcorrected any tendency to rest God's power on our achievements. It thereby linked God's trustworthiness with an unbending personal will, holding that God has even decreed who will be "passed by" and "foreordained" to everlasting death. While it is important to hold that God remains sovereign in the lives of those who have not yet come to Christ, the confession may have carried this further than was needed. It no doubt incorporated the limitations of human decision into its imagery when it declared that God inflexibly decrees who will go to life and who will go into His wrath. Nevertheless, what the authors

did say was that God's power in Christ can never be overcome. It is eternal. Christ remains king everywhere. This means that when we see this concept in correlation with the rest of the confession, it becomes far more supportive of world missions than has frequently been assumed.

Ultimately, God's incarnate, invincible love in Christ redefines all realities. In the light of the cross even a decree or covenant becomes something new. Jesus Christ thus recreates and renews everything without limits, even the limitations of life, death and eternity. Thus we can see that the confession's own testimony to Christ sets up an inner tension with the concept of the decrees. The combination of saving love and eternal decrees may add a more persistent, penetrating character to grace than we first thought. It is a far grander vision than we might think.

Our own Presbyterian Church in 1903 added chapters on the Holy Spirit and on the expression of God's love in mission in order to express more completely this inherent conviction about God's grace. These chapters add to its message, emphasizing that in Christ we need fear nothing. We are called to a great mission, and no human scorn, no clinging stains of past sin long regretted, and no pains of doubt can ever stand between us and the One who calls us.

Two covenants

The Westminster Confession also uses the concept of the two covenants, one of works and one of grace. Found primarily in the seventh chapter, this idea is used to declare that Christ does what no one else can do. It is the focus on covenants that had led some people to think that the confession is dominated by a "covenant" theology. It does include this theme but it certainly includes other important ideas as well.

In Chapter 7, and as amplified in Chapter 21, the confession says that Adam was given a covenant on behalf of his entire progeny. This includes all of us. And the terms were quite specific. According to this view, God required "entire, exact and perpetual obedience" to the moral law. Complete obedience would bring life to Adam and his descendants. Any infraction, however, would result in eternal death.

Taken literally, this idea of the covenant goes far beyond what we can find in Scripture. There is no such idea of the covenant in the Bible and certainly none associated with Adam. What Scripture has provided is a very rich and varied concept which expresses God's very commitment to the future. His commitment is open, heart-rending and concerned to deal with human failings. While there are several covenants mentioned in the Old Testament, John Calvin felt that a single, comprehensive concept better represented the biblical teaching. And from the human, pastoral perspective, one wonders what this "entire" and "exact" obedience could possibly mean.

Surely the authors of the confession knew what they were about here. They must have had a good reason for taking this approach. Without pressing the point, it is possible to discover where its authors

found this theme of the two covenants. They were not the only ones to use it. It had appeared among the English Puritans and in Holland, and can be traced through several theological writers back to the mind of Heinrich Bullinger, the successor to Ulrich Zwingli, the well-known reformer of Zurich.

It is probably quite reasonable to assume that Westminster's authors had read their Bibles and knew that they could find no literal covenant of works mentioned there. What they had come to hold, however, is that moral responsibility is an indelible aspect of being human. And what could be more real in conveying this than the imagery of some kind of moral "covenant" between Adam or rather between ourselves and God?

The important thing is that they applied this concept to say that God's grace in Christ reaches all the way into the ultimate area of moral obligation. It penetrates to the depth of the distinctive elements in human nature, of the moral and spiritual core of which the Bible speaks. Grace goes all the way. It doesn't stop short of the greatest depths of human life.

Thus the concept of Scripture's avenue into truth, of the decrees as an expression of the invincible character of God's grace, and of the covenants as God completing in Christ precisely what we cannot do for ourselves are important terms for us today. In an era in which people are increasingly drawn toward the idea that everything is relative, the Westminster Confession conveys the church's witness that in Jesus Christ, God has done something of spectacular importance for us. The very concept of a "covenant" implies specificity, commitment, permanence and mutual reconciliation. It also testifies to the future. It looks toward a wonderful completion that is yet to unfold.

Taken together these elements from our theological heritage remind us that there is a cosmic cast to God's plan in Christ. They press beyond the horizons which we can see. And equally important, they speak in far more pastoral ways than we might think at first. God's covenant, brought to complete expression in Christ, prepares the way for us to become courageous disciples in his work. It reminds us that however deep our sin, God's power to redeem and to restore binds us close in His heart. Its stalwart, somewhat authoritarian tone reminds us, as confident friends often do, that we had better pay close attention.

What brings all of this to a grand conclusion is the special encouragement in Chapter 34. There, near the end, the confession invites us all to pray for the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Here we are led to that personal, inspiring presence of God that will help us to see still more vividly that even our loftiest concepts cannot measure up to Christ. God is recreating the entire natural order in him. And we are commissioned to do all that we can to extend the kingdom of Christ. The implications of this for our personal lives are immense. They include all that we have and can become, as well as what God can do with us through his Spirit. What particular form this will take for us is

For further reading Ray recommends:

Assembly at Westminster, by John H. Leith (John Knox Press, 1973).

Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition, edited by Donald L. McKim (Eerdmans, 1992).

Puritans and Calvinism, by Peter Toon (Swengel, PA: Reiner Publications, 1973).

The Westminster Confession in the Church Today, edited by Alasdair I.C. Heron (Edinburgh: The St. Andrew Press, 1982).

The Westminster Confession for Today, by George S. Hendry (John Knox Press, 1960).

NOTES

1. Karl Bärth, *The Christian Life, Church Dogmatics IV, 4* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 79.

beyond anything we can grasp. It is the work of the Holy Spirit, however, which leads us even through such ancient symbols as decrees and covenants until we come to Christ. The Westminster Confession has one sure gift for us. It tells us that Jesus Christ is greater than anyone we can imagine and that he can overcome all that would separate us from God. He will enable us to serve him and he will direct us to the work that he has for us to do.

None Other than Jesus Christ

The Christology of The Theological Declaration of Barmen

by James R. Edwards

A common message

"Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and death." This is the first article of the Barmen Declaration, and the center and sum of the ninth document in the *Book of Confessions*. The Barmen Declaration was not intended as a full confession of faith. It is rather a lean and muscular protest against a theology and political system that endeavored to reduce the church to an organ of the Nazi State. Barmen declares that the church can allow no other source of its proclamation or ordering of its life than the gospel of Jesus Christ as it is known in Scripture and attested in the confessions of the Reformation.

A time of common need and temptation

This brief four-page document musters readers to "withstand in faith and unanimity [the church's] destruction ... by means of false doctrine, [and] by means of force and insincere practices" (*Book of Confessions* 8.01). "Grievously imperiled," the German Evangelical (that is, Protestant) Church "has been continually and systematically thwarted and rendered ineffective by alien principles, on the part of the leaders and spokesmen of the 'German Christians' " (8.07).

The source of these perils was a false form of Christianity that derived from the Hitler era and that was permeating the church. "German Christianity," as it was called, attempted a subtle but powerful alliance with the political, economic, and social goals of National Socialism. The objective was to produce a "Positive Christianity" that was anti-communism, anti-internationalism, and anti-Free Masonry. Above all, "Positive Christianity" insisted that Christianity be purged of all Jewish associations. Accordingly, the Old Testament was discredited, and the concepts of original sin and the need for a crucified Savior were effectively dismissed from the New Testament. The humility and suffering of Jesus were replaced by a figure of heroic, Aryan proportions. The "Aryan Paragraph," which debarred persons

9

As the recipient of the grace of the gospel, the church cannot abandon or change the gospel to conform to alien ideologies—Nazi or otherwise—without denying her life and calling.

See Study Guide, pages 63-64.

of "Jewish blood" from serving as Christian ministers, expressed the Nazi obsession with "racial purity."

"German Christians" also sought to subordinate the church to the State. The office of "Reich bishop" was created by Hitler and filled with a pawn, Ludwig Müller, in order to establish an effectual Protestant papacy under Hitler's control. To counteract such "devastation" (8.09), 139 representatives of Lutheran, Reformed, and United Churches, gathered in Barmen (Wuppertal), Germany, from May 29 to 31, 1934, to affirm a Theological Declaration drafted two weeks earlier by Karl Barth. Fifty-two lay persons, 72 pastors, 2 bishops, 5 superintendents, and 8 professors united at the Synod of Barmen to utter "a common message in a time of common need and temptation" (8.08).

The backbone of Barmen

The Barmen Declaration contains six trenchant articles, each consisting of three parts: a verse (or in some cases two) of the New Testament, an affirmation, and a rejection. The texts of Scripture were selected because they represent dominant New Testament themes that confront believers with the demand for obedience. The affirmations are brief and incisive, two of them consisting of single sentences. Each thesis concludes uncompromisingly in the words, "We reject the false doctrine ..." Barmen is thus a double-edged sword, both establishing the truth of the gospel and defending it from foes. Its six articles, in the words of Hans Asmussen who chaired the Synod of Barmen, "are not to be understood as a basis for negotiations with our opponents, as if some bargain could still be made ... On the contrary, they are to be understood as *conditio sine qua non*," i.e., non-negotiables of the faith.

Article One governs the Declaration:

I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me (Jn 14:6). Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber ... I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved (Jn 10:1, 9).

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation. (8.10-12).

This unambiguous article declares that Jesus Christ is known not through human reason, intuition, cultural trends or political ideologies, but solely through Holy Scripture. Jesus Christ is "the one Word of God." There are no alternate sources of revelation; if the church does not hear God's Word in Jesus Christ, it does not hear God's

Word. Jesus Christ is the final and definitive Word of God who speaks to a sinful world and makes possible its salvation. This Word alone is the source of the church's proclamation, which believers must hear, trust and obey in life and death. To quote Asmussen again, "This paragraph means that the Church's task, and indeed the only and the most urgent task, is to preach Christ."

The repudiation is aimed at the "German Christians" who endeavored to enter the "sheepfold" by another door than that of Jesus Christ. "German Christians," of course, continued to use the name of Jesus Christ, but they were in truth thieves and robbers because the foundation of their gospel was not the sole sufficiency of Jesus Christ but values apart from Scripture, particularly those of racial purity and German supremacy.

Closely related to the first article is the second, which also begins with Jesus Christ, "whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor 1:30). Jesus Christ is not only "God's assurance of the forgiveness of our sins," but also and equally "God's mighty claim upon our whole life" (8.14). The Christ in whom Christians alone find forgiveness is the Christ to whom they alone must render obedience. Christ is not a partial manifestation or redeemer of God for some spheres of life (e.g., the spiritual), but not of others (e.g., the political, social, and economic). Christ is God's all-sufficient redemption, complete and final, who frees us "from the godless fetters of this world" (8.14). We are not to become slaves of other masters, but rather, in obedience to him our liberator, we become delivered "for a free, grateful service to his creatures" (8.14).

Article two concludes by rejecting any concept of a penultimate or compartmentalized faith, "as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords" (8.15). Jesus Christ does not translate us into a state of grace and then leave us to ourselves. The state of grace includes forgiveness of sin *and* the total lordship of Jesus Christ over our lives. When we seek God or ultimate values *without Christ* we sell ourselves to false gods and masters. If Jesus Christ is Lord, then other would-be lords—in particular, the blood, race and soil of the "German Christianity"—must be rejected.

The third article addresses the nature of the church. It begins with a quotation from Ephesians 4:15-16, which speaks of Christ as the head of the church. The following affirmation states that "the Christian Church is the congregation of the brethren in which Jesus Christ acts presently as the Lord in Word and Sacrament through the Holy Spirit." (8.17). The church is a creation and congregation of God and not simply a human assembly indebted to social and political ideologies. The church bears witness "in the midst of a sinful world" (8.17), but the church is not the property of a sinful world. It is the property of Jesus Christ, whose life and death brought it into existence, and whose Holy Spirit sustains its life in the world.

The church, therefore, cannot "abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure or to changes in prevailing ideological

For further reading

Edwards recommends:

The Church's Confession Under Hitler, by Arthur C. Cochrane (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage, by Eberhard Bethge (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

The German Churches Under Hitler: Background, Struggle & Epilogue, by Ernst C. Helmreich (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978).

The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust, Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke, eds. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974).

Nazi Persecution of the Churches, by John Conway (New York: Basic Books, 1969).

and political convictions" (8.18). The church is not the inventor of the gospel, but its inheritor and steward. Nor does the church possess the gospel. Rather, the church is possessed by Christ her Lord. As the recipient of the grace of the gospel, the church cannot abandon or change the gospel to conform to alien ideologies—Nazi or otherwise—without denying her life and calling. If the church is to serve the world, it cannot do so when it reflects the world, but only when it proclaims Jesus Christ's word of judgment and grace to the world.

The fifth article, which addresses the relation of church and state, affirms that in this yet unredeemed world, "the State has by divine appointment the task of providing for justice and peace" (8.22). This affirmation assures readers that the church does not advocate political rebellion, anarchy or utopia. On the contrary, the right and necessity of duly established political rulers are taught and affirmed in the gospel. Nevertheless, article five warns of two dangers, and is the only article of Barmen with *two* repudiations. The first sets limits to the powers of the State. The State may not exceed the purposes for which it was appointed by God, as defined in Scripture, nor may it usurp the church in the proclamation of the gospel by seeking to become "the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the Church's vocation as well" (8.23). Second, and equally important, the church cannot allow its message and common life to become a platform for the State's goals and purposes, and thus "an organ of the State" (8.24).

The Declaration concludes with the sixth article, added at the Synod of Barmen to Barth's original draft. It summarizes the Declaration, that the church's commission is to deliver "the free grace of God to all people." Therefore, the Church cannot put the free grace of God in the service of "any arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes, and plans" (8.27).

"The Word of God Abides Forever"

Barmen originally ended in *Verbum Dei Manet in Aeternum*, "the Word of God Abides Forever." "Forever" means that God's Word, as interpreted by Barmen, extends beyond the era of the Third Reich. Let us conclude by considering Barmen's significance for our day.

The chief contribution of Barmen to the church is its uncompromising Christo-centrism. All six articles of Barmen raise a protest against something other than the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ being asserted as a binding claim on the church. Barmen's confession that Jesus Christ is the one and only Word of God whom the church must hear and obey in all life's dimensions addresses a flaw that dates back to the Enlightenment. The haughty iconoclasm of the "German Christians" was but another example of the belief that God or ultimate truth can be found outside Jesus Christ. This belief has been in the bloodstream of the West since the rise of nationalism, science and humanism in the 18th century. Present-day manifestations include an erosion of the idea of the sinfulness of humanity, and a false doctrine of creation that claims people are inherently good by

nature. These two currents undercut the need for redemption; and even when Jesus Christ is admitted as Redeemer today, he is often regarded as one among many.

Other "changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions" (8.18) are lobbying today for a reformulation of Christianity apart from Jesus Christ, the one Word of God. The church is presently subjected to intense pressures to define life in terms of material prosperity, to redefine human sexuality in ways contrary to Scripture, to accept power as a substitute for justice in both domestic and international affairs, and above all, to compromise and deny the God-givenness and sanctity of life. The latter includes not only a growing acceptance of abortion and euthanasia, but a preying on the powerless in society—children, the poor, people of color and often women—and a disregard for the environment as God's good creation.

Second, the "common word" of Lutheran, Reformed, and United Churches in Germany in the 1930s has important ramifications for ecumenism and the diverse religious pluralism in America. Barmen made no attempt to form a new church to promote church union or church merger. Barmen rightly confesses that church unity must begin with unity of confession, not with organizational and administrative unity, and that any attempt to unite apart from confessional unity is to act apart from Jesus Christ, "the one Word of God" (8.11). Moreover, Barmen's repudiation of "German Christianity" is a needed corrective in our day when the church is expected to be an umbrella for every viewpoint. According to Barmen, tolerance and inclusion of positions contrary to "the one Word of God" cannot be allowed to exist alongside or above the gospel. They fall under "other events and powers, figures and truths" (8.12) that must be rejected if Christ is to be confessed.

Finally, Barmen speaks to church officers—to pastors, elders, and deacons. Article four declares that "the various offices of the Church do not establish a dominion of some over the others, ... [but] they are for the exercise of the ministry entrusted to and enjoined upon the whole congregation" (8.20). This article was drafted with the Reich bishop in mind, who in the name of the State and apart from the will or consent of the church assumed control over the church. From this travesty the church was reminded that office is not given in service of power, but that office is empowerment to serve in the name of Christ. Barmen did not want to usurp the rights of the State. It wanted to defend the ministry of the church against alien principles so that Jesus Christ might be known as "the one Word of God," and so that those who are called to minister in his name might serve "the whole congregation" (8.20).

Let God's Word Abide Forever!

NOTES

1. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).
2. Arthur C. Cochrane, *The Church's Confession Under Hitler* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962).
3. John Conway, *Nazi Persecution of the Churches* (New York: Basic Books, 1969).
4. Ernst C. Helmreich, *The German Churches Under Hitler: Background, Struggle & Epilogue* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978).
5. Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke, eds., *The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974).

10

The language and issues addressed in C67 reflect the turbulent social climate of the late 1960s in America and the growing awareness of the problems of poverty, racism and environmental degradation.

See Study Guide, page 64.

Jesus Christ, Our Reconciler

The Christology of The Confession of 1967

by Richard Lovelace and John Jefferson Davis

During the 1920s, two theological minorities were struggling against one another in the northern mainline Presbyterian church. A left-wing group wanted freedom to move away from Reformed doctrine into Liberalism, drifting away from the historic confessions. Meanwhile a conservative group, led by Princeton theologian J. Gresham Machen, sought to keep Presbyterianism anchored to the Westminster Confession, which at that point was the church's official standard.

The broad center of the church watched uneasily as the left and right wings struggled. Most Presbyterian leaders disliked Liberalism and wanted to be faithful to some form of historic orthodoxy. But most also felt that the Old School Princeton theology of the Hodges, B. B. Warfield and Machen was too confining and needed updating.

In the 1930s, the church chose a middle path between Conservatives and Liberals: the Neo-Orthodox or "Crisis" Theology. Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and H. Richard Niebuhr were vigorously critical of Liberalism and sought to restate orthodox beliefs within a modern context. Many sons and daughters of Presbyterian Fundamentalists moved their allegiance to Neo-Orthodoxy, and for several decades this approach continued to dominate Presbyterian seminaries.

One of these Neo-Conservative leaders was Princeton professor Edward Dowey, a primary author of the Confession of 1967 (C67). Dowey says that he almost lost his faith reading Liberal New Testament criticism, but that reading Karl Barth saved his life intellectually. In the 1960s, when the church decided that it needed a new confession of faith to supplement Westminster, Dowey sought to provide the church with a concise restatement of Barth.

Ironically, this occurred just as the second generation of American Neo-Orthodoxy was collapsing into new forms of Liberalism. "Secular" theologies and even proponents of "the death of God" were disturbing the church, and most of them were ex-Barthians. By the late 1960s, Dr. James McCord, president of Princeton Seminary, complained, "Theology is in a shambles!"

Conservative Evangelical Presbyterians felt that the shambles had something to do with deficiencies in Neo-Orthodoxy, and were concerned that these defects would now be nailed into place permanently with the adoption of a new confession. Especially, they worried that the draft of the new confession seemed to shift ultimate theological authority away from the written Word of God to the incarnate Word, without clearly indicating that the Bible is an infallible record of the mind of Christ. Barth's concession to Liberalism that Scripture might contain errors, including theological errors, seemed to them an open invitation for younger theologians to migrate away from orthodoxy.

Evangelical conservatives who had stayed with the mainline church had been poorly organized up to this point. Controversy over the adoption of the Confession of 1967 actually crystallized several of these groups into organizations, including Presbyterians United for Biblical Concerns, one of the groups preceding Presbyterians For Renewal. These bodies formed a sounding board for Evangelicals in the church. At the General Assembly which adopted this new confession, Evangelicals were able to correct the text to give proper prominence to the written Word of God.

From our perspective three decades later, the Confession of 1967 does not look like a document which could start a conservative revolution—though that is what it did. With the crucial weakness on Scripture corrected, the rest of the document appears to be fairly conservative in its restatement of the Reformed faith and application of this to current social issues. And this is especially true of the confession's Christology.

Focus on reconciliation

The stated purpose of this confession, according to the preface (9.05), was not to express a complete "system of doctrine" like the Westminster standards, or to include all the topics of theology. Rather, presupposing and reaffirming the basic trinitarian and Christ-centered structure of the faith, the drafters wished to focus on the theme of *reconciliation* as a central focus, a theme which the drafters considered to be of particular relevance to the current generation. The language and issues addressed reflect the turbulent social climate of the late 1960s in America, and the growing awareness of the problems of poverty, racism and environmental degradation.

C67 confesses Jesus Christ as "God with man ... the eternal Son of the Father," who became man in order to fulfill the work of reconciliation (9.07). The confession thus places itself squarely in the tradition of the great definition of the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.), affirming the true and complete deity and true and complete humanity of Jesus Christ, together with Christ's eternal preexistence. This "Christology from above," stressing the eternal dimension, is linked to a "Christology from below," stressing the temporal dimension of the life of Christ and his saving work understood in terms of the reconciliation of God with man.

The confession highlights the Jewish heritage of Jesus, describing him as a Palestinian Jew who lived among his own people and shared their needs (9.08). The language here reminds the church that any form of anti-Semitism—which, tragically, evidenced itself in the history of European Christianity—is deeply inconsistent with the Jewish roots of the Christian faith.

In the crucial matter of the atonement, the death of Christ is understood in terms of the biblical categories of priestly sacrifice, substitution, ransom from slavery to sin, vicarious satisfaction of a legal penalty, and victory over the powers of evil (9.09). This atoning work was affirmed by God, who raised Jesus from the dead (9.08), vindicating him as the Messiah and Lord for all humanity. C67 is thus solidly biblical and orthodox in the *work* of Christ as well as in the *person* of Christ.

In the section on “The Sin of Man” (9.12), sin is defined as that reality which causes human beings to claim mastery over their own lives and to turn against God, their fellow [humans] and the environment. This sinfulness is manifested in exploitation, rebellion, despair, and isolation. This understanding of humanity’s sinful state resonates both with the biblical record and the autonomous spirit of the modern age.

C67 does not have a separate section devoted to the important doctrine of creation, but a theology of creation is expressed at various points. God has created the world of space and time to be the “sphere of his dealings with men.” In its beauty and vastness the creation reflects, to the eyes of faith, the majesty and mystery of the Creator (9.15). The confession reflects at this point a long emphasis in Christian history which has seen nature subservient to God’s interest in redeeming humanity. A more explicit affirmation of the creation’s *intrinsic* value at this point would have been more consistent with the concerns for proper environmental stewardship expressed elsewhere in the document, e.g., in the statement (9.17) that human beings are to “protect the resources of nature for the common good.”

The section of the confession titled “The New Life” treats the concerns traditionally addressed under the topics of soteriology (“application of the work of redemption”) and ecclesiology. The new life in Christ takes shape “in a community in which persons know that God loves and accepts them in spite of what they are” (9.21). The doctrine of justification, treating the believer’s vertical relation to God, is thus appropriately set within the horizontal and corporate dimensions of the life of the church. Consistent with much recent biblical scholarship, the confession states that the church is a community in which all the people of God are to be nurtured and equipped for ministry (9.24). The daily actions of the people of God constitute the church in mission to the world (9.37). This emphasis of the confession attempts to counteract attitudes of clericalism that have dominated the church in the past and to draw attention to “every-member” ministries.

In section 9.27 the confession addresses the crucial issue of biblical authority. The ultimate authority in the church is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate; the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Scriptures, "which are received and obeyed as the word of God written." The terminology here clearly reflects the older language of the Westminster standards as modified by a more Barthian conception of revelation. The confession thus points to the Scriptures, rather than reason, experience or human culture as the locus of theological authority in the church.

C67 is especially concerned with developing the social implications of the biblical theme of reconciliation for the mission of the church. Reconciliation among nations is urgent in light of the destructive power of modern nuclear, chemical and biological weapons (9.45). The poverty which enslaves so many of the world's poor is "an intolerable violation of God's good creation" (9.46). The relationships of men and women are all too often characterized by anarchy and confusion, and exacerbated by the problems of urbanization and overpopulation (9.47).

In the concluding section, the confession affirms that the redemptive work of God in Christ embraces the whole of human life: social and cultural, economic and political, individual and corporate (9.53). This emphasis on the lordship of Christ over all human culture is deeply consistent with the best insights of the Reformed tradition. Some 32 years after its drafting, the Confession of 1967 can still be seen as an essentially sound expression of the biblical and Reformed faith, which if taken seriously, could continue to have a positive and renewing influence in the life and work of the church.

For further reading
Lovelace and Davis
recommend:

The Cross of Christ, by
John Stott.

11

Jesus proclaimed the reign of God. Filling in the gaps left by the other creeds and confessions, the Brief Statement of Faith includes a section on Jesus' ministry.

See Study Guide, page 64.

We Trust in Jesus Christ

The Christology of the Brief Statement of Faith

by M. Douglas Harper, Jr.

The Brief Statement of Faith is the most recent addition to our Book of Confessions. It affirms that the 1983 reunion of the two separated streams of American Presbyterianism was a theological as well as an organizational reunion. In the Articles of Agreement of the Plan of Reunion it was agreed that a committee would be appointed "to prepare a Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith for possible inclusion in the Book of Confessions" (Article 3). The Brief Statement of Faith adopted by the 1991 General Assembly is the result of that committee's work.

Beginning with Jesus Christ

It is appropriate to look at the Brief Statement of Faith from the standpoint of Christology, since Christological concerns were crucial in shaping it. The "Apostolic Benediction"—*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all* (2 Corinthians 13:13)—provides the outline for the Brief Statement.

Thus, the Brief Statement contains three major sections, one for each of the Persons of the Trinity. Statements about Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, appear first. Confessing, "We *trust* in Jesus Christ" (rather than saying "We *believe* in Jesus Christ") was almost automatic after half a century and more of theological emphasis on the importance of the personal relationship between Jesus Christ and both the Christian community and the individual Christian.

The Brief Statement requires only four words to place itself squarely in the orthodox, catholic Christological tradition. It describes Jesus Christ as "fully human, fully God." He is not a man who became God. He is the God who also became fully human by taking on a fully human life and living it to the full, but without sin.

Some have wondered why the Brief Statement did not use more of the Nicene phraseology or even some of the Chalcedonian language in speaking of the Second Person of the Trinity. The committee felt that the simple statement that Jesus Christ was "fully human,

fully God" was sufficient to indicate the church's adherence to the orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation. Other creeds in the *Book of Confessions* are full and explicit in this regard; the Brief Statement was intended to stand alongside them, not to replace them. The length of the finished document was also a factor. The statement was intended to be brief, and the committee thought it important that there be sufficient space in the Brief Statement to deal with areas not covered by the other creeds in the *Book of Confessions*.

Lines 9-18 of the Brief Statement represent the attempt to fill in some of the gaps left by the other confessions. Insofar as their recital of the facts about the earthly life and ministry of Jesus Christ are concerned, the other creeds in the *Book of Confessions* tend to follow the model of the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. That is, they move immediately from the incarnation and birth of Jesus Christ to his sufferings and death. Lines 9-18 of the Brief Statement summarize the accounts in the gospels that tell what Jesus said and did before he was arrested and put on trial.

Jesus' ministry: preaching, teaching and healing

This is one of the places where punctuation is crucial to understanding the Brief Statement. Line 9—"Jesus proclaimed the reign of God:"—ends with a colon, not a period. This means that everything that follows in lines 10-18 is meant to describe how Jesus went about proclaiming the reign of God. It underscores the fact that the gospels picture everything Jesus said and did as part of his proclamation of the present reality, as well as the future coming of the kingdom of God. He did not simply proclaim it, of course, but invited all to enter the kingdom through faith in him.

The Scripture references for these lines are listed in the *Book of Confessions* and are well worth studying. Lines 10-11 which refer to Jesus' "preaching the good news to the poor/and release to the captives" are taken directly from his sermon in Nazareth as recorded in Luke 4. It is an obvious way to begin, since that was in a sense how Jesus began. But the numerous other passages that are listed should indicate how difficult it is to summarize our Lord's public ministry in a few lines. What do you choose to say and what do you leave out? The resulting lines suggest how Jesus went about proclaiming the reign of God.

Line 12—"teaching by word and deed"—picks up the teaching of Jesus, the second major element in his public ministry, and makes it clear that in his teaching our Lord not only "talked the talk" but also "walked the walk." The reference in line 13 to "blessing the children" reminds us of one of the most touching aspects of Jesus' life—his openness to children in contrast to some of the attitudes of his disciples. In this he was in full accord with the Old Testament understanding of family. The reminder that Jesus blessed the children emphasizes this fact, as well as points forward to the Reformed understanding of the place of children in the Covenant.

“Healing the sick” (line 14) is the third member of the trilogy of “preaching, teaching and healing” which sums up the overall ministry of Jesus. Clearly, any description of Jesus’ ministry had to point to the remarkable way in which he healed every kind of human disease. A natural partner to this statement is his “binding up the broken-hearted,” that is, his ministering not only to the physical and mental ills, but also to the sicknesses of the human heart.

“Eating with outcasts” (line 16) emphasizes another feature of Jesus’ public ministry which was not only distinctive but which, perhaps more than any other, offended the religious leaders of his day. Over and over again the gospels record the controversies that were kindled by Jesus’ ready fellowship with “tax collectors and sinners” and his willingness to deal with other outcasts such as lepers.

Lines 17 and 18, the concluding lines in the Brief Statement’s description of Jesus’ public ministry, point to the very heart of his proclamation of the reign of God—that is, his “forgiving sinners and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.” The gospels again and again attest to the fact that he forgave sinners. And in his preaching and teaching he never failed to call all who heard him to enter God’s reign by repenting and believing the good news of God’s love.

One other thing needs to be noted in regard to lines 9-18. In addition to filling in gaps left by the other confessions, it was the committee’s hope to offer a guide to Christian living. The obvious exception, of course, is line 17, “forgiving sinners,” which only Jesus could do! But the other actions of Jesus confessed in these lines model a way of life for the church and for individual Christians. We are to test our lives by their likeness to the life of our Lord, and by confessing these lines we always keep the model of his life before us. At this point, the Christology of the Brief Statement becomes instruction in Christian ethics.

Jesus’ death and resurrection

In lines 19-26 we confess the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and so return to the outline of the Apostle’s Creed. In these lines we also confess some specific ways of understanding the cross and empty tomb. Line 19, which describes Jesus as “unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition,” makes it clear that Jesus’ death was the result of two different accusations and was the responsibility of two power structures. The judgment of the Jewish legal system was that he was guilty of blasphemy, while the Roman condemnation was based on his being seen as a threat to the civil order. Neither of these was just, since Jesus was not guilty of either charge. But the blame rests squarely on two legal systems, not on one.

Lines 20-22 display two aspects of Jesus’ crucifixion. That he died “suffering the depths of human pain” makes it clear that his death was real and not a sham, and that it was a fully human death in which he suffered as any other victim of crucifixion would suffer. Indeed, his suffering exceeded that of other such sufferers, for he

brought to it a spirit unstained by sin and was thus open to suffering as no other had been open. Line 22 points to the other aspect of Jesus' death. In his suffering and death, he was "giving his life for the sins of the world." The Brief Statement makes no attempt to advance a theory of the atonement at this point but simply asserts the fact that our Lord's suffering and death on the cross were all that was required for the forgiveness of sin.

Lines 23-27 speak of the reality and effects of the resurrection of Jesus. The use of "this" in line 23—God raised *this* Jesus from the dead—may puzzle some. It is, of course, a direct quotation from Peter's Pentecost sermon where he says, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses" (Acts 2:32). Its purpose in the Brief Statement is similar to Peter's purpose at Pentecost, that is, to affirm that the selfsame Jesus who was crucified, dead and buried was the Jesus who rose from the dead on Easter Sunday. It is a ringing affirmation of the empty tomb and of the reality of our Lord's resurrection from the dead.

Lines 24-26 speak of the effects of Jesus' rising from the dead. It was, first of all, God's way of "vindicating his sinless life." His accusers in both the Jewish and Roman law courts had found him guilty of the crimes of blasphemy and sedition. Throughout his public ministry others had accused him of false teaching and even of working with Satan. The resurrection was his vindication. He was not guilty of those charges, nor of any others. The Old Testament dictum, "The soul that sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4), had no bearing on his death. His life was sinless; and the resurrection was proof that he died for the sins of others, not for his own sins.

Jesus' resurrection was the means of "breaking the power of sin and evil" (line 25). When he arose, the war with evil was won! To be sure, as has often been pointed out, there were many battles still to be fought; but the final result was not in doubt. Evil was defeated, the power of sin was broken, and in God's good time the final victory will come.

Line 26, "delivering us from death to life eternal," summarizes the way Jesus' defeat of sin and evil affects the lives of believers. Because of sin, all of humankind is under sentence of spiritual death; Jesus' resurrection delivers believers from the death that is the just reward of their sins. It does more than free believers from the past, however. It also brings eternal life, beginning here and now.

Conclusion

The final Christological note is sounded in the concluding lines of the Brief Statement. There we confess that we are constantly on the watch for "God's new heaven and new earth" (line 75). This new order will come only when God grants our prayer, which was also the prayer of the New Testament church, "Come, Lord Jesus!" (line 76). Lines 77-79 pick up the Christological theme of Romans 8 with the

For further reading

Harper recommends:

Belonging to God, by William C. Placher and David Willis-Watkins (Westminster/John Knox).

To Confess the Faith Today, edited by Jack L. Stotts (Westminster/John Knox).

Creeds of the Churches, edited by John H. Leith (Third Edition, Westminster/John Knox, 1982).

Presbyterian Creeds, by Jack Rogers. (The revised edition has a section on the Brief Statement of Faith.)

(Placher, Willis-Watkins, Stotts, and Rogers were members of the drafting committee for The Brief Statement of Faith.)

assurance that "nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

On this note of rejoicing the Brief Statement ends. It is a solid theological work. Its Christology is the Christology of the great orthodox tradition of catholic Christianity. It has many other merits, but these things alone make it a proper companion for the other creeds in our *Book of Confessions*.

(UIC) declaration puts it, "Engrafted [by the Spirit] into Jesus Christ we participate through faith in his relationship with the Father." (4) God's redemptive action comes to us *from* the Father *through* the Son *in the power* of the Spirit. Our response arises *in the power* of the Spirit, *through* the Son, *back to* the Father.

This trinitarian faith collides with elements of modern church practice. James Torrance observes how often we conceive Christian faith in terms of an individualized, personal relationship with "God." This solitary, unmediated faith is effectively *unitarian*, in that it entirely ignores the Trinitarian patterns of God's approach to us and our response back to God. "In theological language, this means that the only priesthood is our priesthood, the only offering our offering, the only intercessions, our intercessions." (5)

The problems with this unitarian belief become apparent when church members start spinning out its consequences. If I enjoy direct, unmediated access to God, the church is superfluous. I can commune with God just as well on the golf course as in worship! The Christian community, the sacraments, corporate worship, the organized life of the church—all of these appear optional "extras." My individualized relationship with God exists quite independently of them.

How very different does Christian faith appear when founded on a trinitarian confession of God's self-disclosure to us! If Christ is the sole mediator between God and humankind, if our every response to God is lifted up to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit, then there is simply no question of our communion with God apart from our engrafting into the Son—and thus into his body, which is the church! We have no independent communion with God apart from our participation, by the Spirit of adoption, in Jesus' own relationship with the Father. And such adoption is inseparable from our communion in the church with our brothers and sisters who have been similarly adopted. There is no independent, unmediated worship of God, for there is only one mediator between God and humankind. (6) That means there is no true response to God apart from our participation in Christ, and our fellowship with all those who belong to him. "In Baptism and conversion the Spirit engrafts us into Christ, establishing the Church's unity and binding us to one another in him" (UIC, II). One cannot love Christ and reject Christ's people.

Knowledge versus self-expression

"By our union with Christ we participate in his knowledge of the Father, given to us as the gift of faith ..." (UIC, III). To confess Christ with the historic church is to affirm that God has been definitively disclosed through the sending of the Son in the power of the Spirit. This means our communion with God involves genuine knowledge, given as the Holy Spirit opens our minds and hearts to perceive the glory of the Father present among us in the Son. (7) Such perception is a sharing in Christ's own knowledge of the Father, as Paul teaches when he says that those who are in the Spirit "have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16). In light of such knowledge,

Christians are obliged to distinguish true religious assertions from false ones.

This confession collides with popular notions of "spirituality" that identify religious faith with private opinion and individual self-expression. In this view individuals each have their own private sense of the sacred, expressed outwardly via personal choices of religious symbols and beliefs. (8) Religion thus consists not of knowledge but of personal opinion and preference, and any suggestion that particular beliefs might be true or false is quickly denounced as an immoral attempt to impose one's own beliefs on other people, thereby denying their freedom to choose. Religion is a purely private and individual affair.

Confessing the faith of the church, we assert that in Christ the one, true God has appeared among us as a particular human being, and the ultimate fate of the world as a whole and every human being—whether they like it or not!—hinges upon their relation to him. Private religious opinions, however sincere, are not the final court of appeal for spiritual claims, for every private religious opinion will appear before the judgment seat of Christ. "His Lordship casts down every idolatrous claim to authority. His incarnation discloses the only path to God" (UIC, I).

Confessing Christ by our hope

Repentance versus resignation

To confess Christ in concert with the historic Church is to confess our own death to sin and our resurrection to new life in him. (9) Our sinful selves are put to death with Christ as we are united with him by the Spirit in baptism. With that death of our sinful selves comes the promise of new life: "Though obscured by our sin, our union with Christ causes his life to shine forth in our lives. This transformation of our lives into the image of Christ is a work of the Holy Spirit begun in this life as a sign and promise of its completion in the life to come" (UIC, IV).

This new life in Christ is a foretaste of eternal life, and it makes its power felt here and now in transformed lives, in hearts set ablaze with love for God and neighbor. Though often marked by setbacks and hindrances, the whole Christian life is thus a pilgrimage from death to life, a process of growth away from our sinfulness into the fullness of Christ.

Such a confession contrasts markedly with popular piety that portrays the gospel in terms of God's loving us and accepting us "just the way we are." Like most heresies this one has a kernel of truth: God's *calling* does come to us "just the way we are," Christ's *invitation* to repentance and discipleship extends to us utterly without precondition. But far from loving and accepting our sinful condition, Christ went to the cross to put to death the way we are, and he rose to give us new life beyond our captivity to sin and death. Christians cannot be resigned to their sinfulness.

Those who confess Christ in our day must be prepared for the opposition of a culturally captive Christianity, supported by the self-esteem movement of our secular, therapeutic society, which understands its mission in terms of baptizing the *status quo*, of helping people to “feel good about themselves” whatever the spiritual condition of their hearts. The church’s faith, by contrast, introduces a holy disquiet into the lives of believers, a straining forward in pursuit of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. The church’s confession sets people on pilgrimage toward the heavenly Jerusalem: it does not make them feel good about life in our present-day Babylon. “We turn away from forms of Church life that ignore the need for repentance, that discount the transforming power of the gospel, or that fail to pray, hope and strive for a life that is pleasing to God” (UIC II).

Commitment and confidence versus cynicism and despair

With the church we confess that Christ has risen triumphant over every power of evil, death, sin, guilt, oppression and alienation. Yet, the Christian acknowledges and confronts the residual existence of these now-broken powers in the world around us. Where it is given us to do so, we oppose these powers with the means at our disposal, not as a desperate struggle of life and death but as a *sign* of God’s accomplished victory over them. Such opposition, whether successful or not in the short term, always takes place thankfully within the serene and confident and joyous assurance that in Christ the defeat of such powers is an accomplished certainty, their ultimate power to destroy us having been vanquished forever by his cross and resurrection.

Such a confession contrasts markedly with the cynicism and nihilism that characterize our cultural landscape, particularly among the young. Over against a despairing attitude that assumes life to be insignificant and our efforts meaningless, the church’s faith lends to everyday actions and decisions an astonishing import. Ordinary life carries a whiff of eternity, and it is especially deeds of love, Paul tells us, whose abiding significance will become apparent in the world to come. (10)

This faith equips Christians for hopeful and loving service in the world that does not have to justify itself by an expectation of quick and substantial “this-worldly” benefits. A classic example of this is the celebrated ministry of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, retrieving dying beggars from the gutters in order to bring some love and caring into their last few hours—not an activity that can be justified in terms of “this-worldly” social benefits. Mother Teresa defended it as “something beautiful for God.” Confessing in hope our participation in Christ’s resurrection gives Christian believers an affinity for hopeless causes, an ability to love and labor in circumstances where the work is difficult and the immediate payoffs are few. We can do this with confidence and hope, knowing that no deed of love and compassion is ever lost to God. “By our union with Christ the Church participates

in Christ's resurrected life and awaits in hope the future that God has prepared for her" (UIC, V).

Confessing Christ by our love

Mission versus consumerism

The church's trinitarian confession grounds her mission in God's own mission, undertaken in the sending of the Son into the world. United with Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, the church becomes the executor not of her own mission, but rather a participant in Christ's own mission as he is sent from the Father. "Jesus Christ is the mission of God to and for the world" (UIC, I). This means that the church, by its very nature as the body of Christ, is turned outward. "By our union with Christ our lives participate in God's mission to the world: to uphold the value of every human life, to make disciples of all peoples, to establish Christ's justice and peace in all creation, and to secure that visible oneness in Christ that is the promised inheritance of every believer" (UIC, V).

This confession cuts against the grain of a congregational culture that has frequently become utterly self-absorbed. (11) Consumerist thinking leads congregations to focus their resources on addressing the needs, real and imagined, of their own dues-paying "customers." Church life becomes dominated by the maintenance of our own institutional trappings and traditions.

Confessing Christ in company with the historic church makes it clear, to the contrary, that to be the church is to be part of Christ's loving mission to the world and for the world on behalf of the Father. The body of Christ cannot be separated from the work and mission of Christ. "We turn away from forms of Church life that fail to bear witness in word and deed to Christ's compassion and peace and the Gospel of salvation" (UIC, V).

Relational personhood versus individualism

The historic church confesses Jesus Christ not only as true God but also as truly human. He is "the truly human one" (UIC, I). This means that in Jesus Christ we catch a glimpse for the first time of human existence as God meant it to be, undistorted by the effects of sin. This confession takes on profound implications as we reflect on what makes Jesus the person he is. In the light of our trinitarian confession, we recognize that Jesus is who he is *by virtue of his relationships*. He is the Son only in relation to the Father—that relatedness constitutes the core of his identity. Similarly Jesus in his ministry is the man for others—his sacrifice of himself in obedience to the Father for the sake of his fellow human beings expresses at the deepest level the secret of Jesus' personhood, the essence of who he is. If Jesus is the exemplar of true humanity, we have to conclude that human identity and personhood are constituted truly and according to God's intention by our relationships. We are defined and constituted as persons by the bonds of love that unite us to God and to other people.

For further reading the author recommends:

Either/Or: The Gospel or Neopaganism, by Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, editors (Eerdmans 1995).

Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony, by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon (Abingdon Press, 1989).

Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture, by Lesslie Newbigin (Eerdmans, 1986).

Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace, by James B. Torrance (Intervarsity Press, 1996).

NOTES

1. *Luther: Lectures on Romans*, ed. Wilhelm Pauck, The Library of Christian Classics: Ichthus Edition (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 104-5.
2. This document can be accessed online at <http://www.presbycoalition.org/declaration1.htm>. See also the forthcoming volume: Andrew Purves and Mark Achtemeier, *Union in Christ: A Commentary with Questions for Study and Discussion* (Louisville: Witherspoon Press, 1999).
3. This sharing in Christ's communion with the One he (and only he!) addresses as "Father" becomes a reality as he invites his disciples to pray with him, "Our Father, who art in heaven ..."
4. *Union in Christ*, Section III.
5. James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 20.
6. 1 Tim 2:5
7. 2 Cor 4:6, Heb 1:3
8. George Lindbeck has coined the term "Experiential Expressivism" for such an approach. See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), ch. 2.
9. Rom 6:2-4.
10. 1 Cor 13:13.
11. Cf. Augustine's characterization of the Fall's effects upon individuals, producing the *anima incurvatus in se*—the soul turned in upon itself!

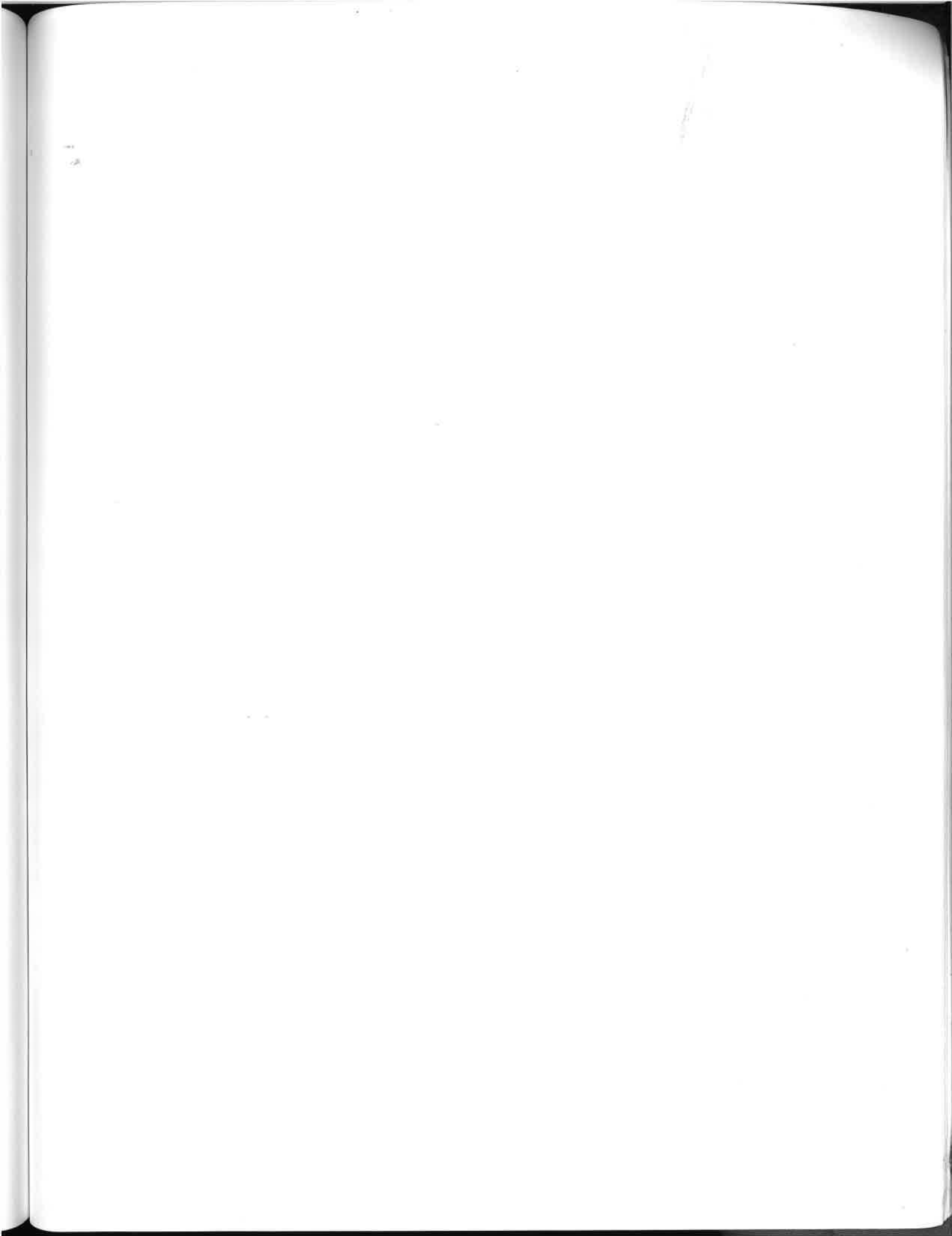
This confession again contradicts the deepest instincts of secular culture, which tends to regard a fulfilled person as one who has complete freedom to make unhindered, autonomous choices. Personhood—who I *am*—is constituted in this view by means of individual self-expression. My choices, if they are authentic and true to my innermost preferences and feelings, constitute both my "lifestyle" and my essential identity as a person.

The consequences of this collision between Christian faith and secular culture are enormous. As a single example, consider how they affect our understandings of marriage and family life. If my personhood grows out of my ability to make choices freely according to my inner preferences, then family life constitutes at its core a restriction to my personhood, for its daily give-and-take of compromises and mutual obligations limit my freedom. The only way I can rationalize such limitation is by a kind of cost-benefit analysis: I accept these restrictions on my freedom and my personhood for the sake of other desirable goods I find in family life—financial security, companionship, love, etc. In the context of such a "bargain," however, I will want to check regularly to make sure the benefits I receive justify the sacrifice of my personal freedom. Is the bargain "fair"? Am I getting as much as I'm giving? Are my needs being met adequately? Am I happy? Seen in such a light, it is little wonder that American culture has had a difficult time sustaining marriages that last across all the changes that mark the lifetime of couples together.

What a difference the confession of Christ as the truly human one makes. Rather than being a threat to my personhood, the relationships that constitute family life are *themselves* what constitute me as a person. Rather than being a threat to my core identity, they make me what I am. Like Christ, we receive our personhood in relationship—hence there is no need constantly to be asking if they are "worth it." Sacrificing for the sake of another person becomes not a threat to my personhood, but its fulfillment—the concrete embodiment of our union and the deepening of the love that binds us together. Hence a marriage or a family acquires the strength to ride out those changes and infirmities where one spouse's ability to "give" in certain ways is diminished.

What is true of family is of course also true of church life. It is in our being joined together with these brothers and sisters that our personhood is established and secured. Such confession calls gravely into question the denominational divisions which obscure the oneness of Christ's body. "By our union with Christ the Church binds together believers in every time and place" (UIC, V).

We have caught a glimpse with this essay of what it means to confess Christ in company with the historic church. May God grant to the church in our day the courage and the strength to joyfully and thankfully confess his Son in our believing, in our hoping, and in our loving! Amen.



STUDY GUIDE

The following questions are designed to stimulate your thinking in response to the preceding articles. You may be asked to refer to portions of the cited confession to anchor your reflection in a proper context.

Though Bible study, per se, was not our primary goal here, you can find extensive Scriptural references in the *Book of Confessions* following the Westminster Confession and Catechisms and the Brief Statement of Faith.

The Nicene Creed (page 11)

1. Let's say Arius' assertion was true, that there was a time when Jesus Christ was not. What would this mean for your faith and trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord? How would this affect your confidence in the Scriptures (e.g. John 1, Colossians 1)?
2. What is the objective truth about who Jesus Christ is? How does one arrive at an answer to that question? How does this truth inform your understanding, in practical terms, of who Jesus Christ is to you?

The Apostles' Creed (page 15)

1. Describe in your own words how "Jesus, God's Son our Lord" is Christology in a nutshell.
2. By way of its unadorned narrative, what unique theological contribution does the Apostles' Creed make to our understanding of Jesus Christ? Why is this contribution important for us today?
3. Looking at the Creed itself, how is "he suffered under Pontius Pilate" as important a statement as, for instance, "conceived by the Holy Ghost" or "on the third day he rose from the dead"? What essential truth does this reveal about Jesus Christ?

The Scots Confession (page 19)

1. What parallels can you draw between 16th century Scotland and 21st century America?
2. How is God's "eternal wisdom" and "glory" manifested in Christ's divinity and his humanity? Is his wisdom and glory a matter of revelation or experience, or both?
3. Why are we not able to save ourselves? Why do so many try so hard to do so?

The Heidelberg Catechism (page 25)

1. How does the confession make a distinction between “Jesus becoming our righteousness” and “Jesus making us righteous”? Why is this distinction important in our everyday Christian life?
2. How have you experienced Jesus as Lord? What has this meant for your relationships and occupations?
3. What does the “Christ-shaped life”—as prophet, priest and king—look like for you these days? Is this a comforting reality for you, or a disturbing challenge?

The Second Helvetic Confession (page 29)

1. On the basis of Dr. George’s summary of this lengthy confession, list the essential elements you would include in your own “one-page confessional statement.”
2. As “the only Mediator between God and humanity,” what did Jesus do and what is he still doing today? Is the description you just gave a Christology “from above” or “from below”?
3. What can you do in your ministry to address what George identifies as the central issue for the future church?

The Westminster Confession of Faith (page 34)

1. How does your discipline of Bible reading and/or study reflect your belief about the authority of Scripture? What have you done to invite others into regular Bible study?
2. How does God’s commitment to your salvation overcome the changing conditions of your life? In what way does God’s salvation obligate you morally?
3. How has Christ been your prophet (clarifier of truth), your priest (the living bond between you and the Father), and your king (able to carry out God’s purposes)?

The Theological Declaration of Barmen (page 41)

1. What were some of the “alien principles” threatening the church in Hitler’s day?
2. According to Barmen, what is the link between Jesus and the Scriptures? Is it possible to make a distinction between obeying Christ and obeying Scripture?
3. How would you respond to the person who says, “Jesus is Lord of my life, and I live for the thrill of shoplifting”?

(continued on next page)

4. How does the Barmen situation relate to the American separation of church and state, which some have called freedom from religion rather than freedom of religion? According to Barmen, what is the legitimate role of the church in culture?

The Confession of 1967 (page 46)

1. Whom was Christ reconciling? How did he do this and why?
2. How does this primary reconciliation affect and empower "the ministry of reconciliation"?
3. According to Part III of the confession, what can the Christian expect to be the ultimate fulfillment of Christ's work of reconciliation?

A Brief Statement of Faith (page 50)

1. How do you differentiate between "believing" and "trusting" Jesus Christ? Do you see faith as a single saving action, or as a composite of steps in the right direction? If the latter, what would those steps be?
2. How would you describe Jesus' ministry on earth? To what degree is his earthly ministry important, particularly in light of his death and resurrection?

Confessing Jesus Christ Today (page 55)

1. As you read Dr. Achtemeier's essay, underline adjectives he uses to describe the cultural climate in which we (Americans) live. What have you observed in support of his assertions?
2. As you confess Christ by your faith, what difference has it made to you to know that you are related to the Father through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit? What sort of response has arisen in you as a result?
3. As you confess Christ by your hope, what promise has been given to you, and what has it cost you to lay hold of that promise?
4. As you confess Christ by your love, how has a belief in Jesus Christ affected your view of the world and your place in it?

PFR reFORM

is a publication of

Presbyterians For Renewal

*dedicated to the glory of God for
the renewal of theology as a life-
giving discipline of the elders,
deacons, and ministers of Word
and Sacrament in the
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).*

ReFORM

VOL. 2, No. 1, SPRING 1999

Jesus Christ in the Confessions

Catherine J. S. Purves: *The Nicene Creed*

George Hunsinger: *The Apostles' Creed*

Richard Paddon: *The Scots Confession*

Karen Petersen Finch: *The Heidelberg Catechism*

Sherron Kay George: *The Second Helvetic
Confession*

Richard A. Ray: *The Westminster Confession*

James R. Edwards: *The Theological Declaration
of Barmen*

Richard Lovelace and John Jefferson Davis:
The Confession of 1967

M. Douglas Harper, Jr.: *A Brief Statement of Faith*

Mark Achtemeier: *Confessing Jesus Christ Today*

Study Guide