



### The *Book of Confessions*? What's That?

When deacons and elders (and ministers) are ordained in the Presbyterian Church, they vow to “be continually guided by our confessions.” I will admit that when I was first ordained—as a deacon, sometime in the early 90s—I paid absolutely no attention to that line. I don't think I was alone in that, but it's too bad, because the confessions of the Presbyterian Church, collected in *The Book of Confessions*, are a fascinating, and important, set of documents.

There are eleven confessions in this book, and you know two of them: the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed. The others include three written at the time of the Reformation (Scots Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Second Helvetic Confession); the Westminster Confession of Faith, which was the primary confession for the Puritans and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who came to this country; the Theological Declaration of Barmen, written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others to protest the alliance of Christianity and Hitler's National Socialism; the Confession of 1967, which is built around 2 Cor. 5:19—“In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself”; and A Brief Statement of Faith, written in 1983 when the northern and southern Presbyterian churches reunited.

The Confessions have several purposes. First, they help us interpret the Scriptures, and second, they summarize what we believe. In an article on the Presbyterian Leader website, Jack Rogers writes about those beliefs:

- All Christians share two fundamental beliefs. One is the mystery of the Trinity. We believe in one God, manifested and known in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This God is our creator, redeemer, and sustainer. The second fundamental belief of all Christians is that Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the eternal Word of God. We are not alone. God came, in the flesh, to be with us in the person of Jesus Christ that we may be saved and learn how to live the Christian life.
- We are also Protestant .... We are inheritors of the sixteenth-century renewal of the church based on a return to the good news of the gospel. Two doctrines were added to those of the ancient creeds: justification by grace alone, through faith, and Scripture as the final authority for salvation and the life of faith.

(“The Book of Confessions,” <[https://](https://www.thepresbyterianleader.com/LeaderReader/040710.html)

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And finally, the Confessions express our beliefs as Presbyterians, part of the Reformed tradition. Several doctrines define that tradition:

- The sovereignty of God: As the *Book of Order* puts it, we affirm “the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love” (G-2.0500).
- God's election (choosing) of us for salvation and for service.
- Covenant life: God created a covenant with us that brings us into a family relationship with each other.
- Faithful stewardship: God calls us to live lives that shun ostentation and care for God's creation.
- “The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God” (*Book of Order* G-2.0500a.4.)

### Using the Confessions in Worship

Over the next several months, we will use parts of various confessions (most of them are far longer than the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds) in our affirmation of faith. You'll notice that the language of some of them clearly comes from earlier centuries, and you'll notice that they have different emphases. By using all of them, though, we will learn more about what we believe as Presbyterians. I'll be interested to hear about your responses—are you intrigued? bothered? inspired? Let's talk!

And if you'd like to read the confessions, see me for a copy, or go to this page on the PC(USA) website: <http://www.pcusa.org/oga/constitution.htm>.