

A Legacy of Faith

Reformation Lessons and Carols

Rev. Carol Holbrook Prickett © 2021

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

THE CHURCH ARISES

Today is Reformation Sunday, a day when we celebrate how the church has grown and changed as it seeks to be Christ's body on earth. This church we know and love today, [*name of church*], did not come about by accident. We stand on the shoulders of countless generations who have sought to love and serve God, interpret the scriptures, and work out their faith in their particular day and time.

This service celebrates their legacy by taking a journey through the PC(USA) Book of Confessions. Some of you are very familiar with the confessions, and some of you may know nothing about them. The confessions are, simply, statements of faith; the efforts of various people at various times to make some kind of coherent summary of what Christianity calls us to say and do. These confessions are part of our constitution as Presbyterians, meaning they guide and shape our life together. Pastors and elders vow to be guided by them. They are not scripture, and we do not believe or follow every word they say; but they do witness to the journey our ancestors have taken in gifting us with the church we know today.

As we prepare to journey from the earliest Christian church to the present day, I invite you to dedicate your mind, heart, and spirit in prayer:

Lord, give us open ears to hear your voice in the voices of our ancestors; give us open minds to understand what they experienced and believed; give us open hearts to accept what you might be saying to us today. As we leaf through the history of your church, guide us into writing new chapters for the future! In your holy name we pray. Amen.

Let us set the scene with music. Our first song, *Of the Father's Love Begotten*, comes from a fourth century poem and has been treasured by the church for over 1500 years. Let us stand and sing.

* Song "Of the Father's Love Begotten"

Nicene Creed

It was 381 AD. The emperor Constantine had declared Christianity the one true unified religion of the Roman Empire—but found that Christianity was anything but unified. He had already convened one council to try to bring some order to this unruly young religion, but Christians with different perspectives on the divinity of Jesus continued to fight it out—

sometimes with their pens, and sometimes with their fists! And so, in 381, another council came together, and adopted the Nicene Creed, which shares much language with the Apostles' Creed, and is used by creedal Christians in diverse traditions across the world.

Using the printed words in your bulletin, let us responsively proclaim what our ancestors have so long believed, beginning in unison:

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

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

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.¹

THE CHURCH IS REFORMED

For nearly 1500 years, that Catholic church grew and spread across the globe, and while it underwent change and transformation, it managed to mostly hang together until an earthquake hit it—an earthquake called the Protestant Reformation. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed 95 complaints to a church door in Wittenberg, sparking debate and controversy that would eventually lead to new and even more diverse ways of being the church.

It was not an easy time, and the reformers were not always the heroes we would have them be. So lest we get too puffed up celebrating our own family line, let's stop now and confess our sins together, asking God for mercy and pardon, using the words printed in your bulletin.

**Holy and gracious God,
we confess today
to the same sins
that have always plagued your church:**

**we are too stuck in our ways
too resistant to your Spirit
too attracted to power and privilege
too quick to build walls
too slow to build bridges.**

**Send more reformation our way
until we are formed perfectly by you.
In Christ's name we pray. Amen.**

Friends, hear the good news! Sin has always been at work in the world, yet God's grace meets it toe-to-toe. We believe that when the story is over, it is forgiveness that will have the last word.

In Christ we are forgiven, now and as often as we come before him. Alleluia! Amen.

As we turn to the Reformation confessions, let's set the scene with a hymn Martin Luther himself wrote in the late 1520s, a hymn of strength and solace for the challenges he and his fellow reformers faced. Let us stand and sing together "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

*** Song "A Mighty Fortress is Our God"**

The Scots Confession

The Scots Confession was written in Scotland, of course, in 1560, in the course of just four days. In a time of political turbulence, it declares God's everlasting power over the Kirk—the Scottish word for church—and indeed the whole world. This is what our ancestors proclaimed:

As we believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
so we firmly believe that from the beginning
there has been, now is, and to the end of the world shall be,
one Kirk, that is to say,
one company and multitude of people chosen by God,
who rightly worship and embrace him
by true faith in Christ Jesus,
who is the only Head of the Kirk,
even as it is the body and spouse of Christ Jesus.
This Kirk is catholic, that is, universal,
because it contains the chosen of all ages,
of all realms, nations, and tongues,
be they of the Jews or be they of the Gentiles,
who have communion and society with God the Father,
and with his Son, Christ Jesus,
through the sanctification of his Holy Spirit.
It is therefore called the communion,
not of profane persons, but of saints,
who, as citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem,

have the fruit of inestimable benefits,
one God, one Lord Jesus, one faith, and one baptism.²

Over on the mainland, Lutherans and Reformed Christians—what we know now as Presbyterians—were fighting over communion. And so theologians from each camp sat down together in Germany to create a statement they could all agree with, to find words of unity and peace, and to remember that despite faithful disagreements, they ultimately all belonged to Christ. They wrote their confession as a series of questions, formally called a catechism. These questions invite us to proclaim for ourselves the trust we have in Christ. So let us respond to their first question together, in the words printed in your bulletin.

The Heidelberg Catechism

What is your only comfort in life and in death?

**That I am not my own, but belong—
body and soul, in life and in death—
to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.**

**He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,
and has set me free from the tyranny of evil.**

**He also watches over me in such a way
that not a hair can fall from my head
without the will of my Father in heaven;
in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.**

**Because I belong to him,
Christ, by his Holy Spirit,
assures me of eternal life
and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready
from now on to live for him.³**

Second Helvetic Confession

Our final Reformation confession was written by a Swiss pastor in 1561, designed as a practical guide for his congregation in living out their renewed faith. It emphasizes the Reformation conviction that faith is not a result of human insight or action, but a pure gift from God. Therefore we are not saved by our faith, but by God's grace, which we come to know and feel and experience *through* the faith God gives us. Listen for the words of our ancestors:

Christian faith is not an opinion or human conviction,
but a most firm trust and a clear and steadfast assent of the mind,
and then a most certain apprehension of the truth of God
presented in the Scriptures and in the Apostles' Creed,
and thus also of God himself, the greatest good,
and especially of God's promise
and of Christ who is the fulfilment of all promises.

But this faith is a pure gift of God,
which God alone of his grace gives to his elect

according to his measure
when, to whom and to the degree he wills.
And he does this by the Holy Spirit
by means of the preaching of the Gospel
and steadfast prayer.⁴

Offering

Friends, since God has given so freely to us, let us give freely to God and to God's church, that we might continue to be a beacon of faith. As we make our offerings this week, we will sing "The Church's One Foundation," written in 1866 as both lament for the disunity of the church and hope for all the church might yet be. Let us stand and sing together.

*** Song "The Church's One Foundation"**

The Westminster Standards: Shorter Westminster Catechism

A generation after the Reformation, a group of English theologians gathered to create a new confession. Over the course of more than a thousand meetings (how Presbyterian!), they created the Westminster Confession. In addition, this period produced two catechisms, one for preachers by a professor of divinity, the other for children by a professor of mathematics. The following questions were for children to memorize! Using the words printed in your bulletin, let us ask ourselves the same questions our ancestors asked:

Q. 1. What is the chief and highest end of humanity?

**A. Humanity's chief and highest end is to glorify God,
and fully to enjoy him forever.⁵**

Q. 33. What is justification?

**A. Justification is an act of God's free grace,
wherein he pardons all our sins,
and accepts us as righteous in his sight,
only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us,
and received by faith alone.**

Q. 34. What is adoption?

**A. Adoption is an act of God's free grace,
whereby we are received into the number,
and have a right to all privileges,
of the children of God.**

Q. 35. What is sanctification?

**A. Sanctification is the work of God's free grace,
whereby we are renewed in the whole person
after the image of God,**

**and are enabled more and more to die unto sin
and live unto righteousness.**

Q. 36. What are the benefits which in this life
do accompany or flow from justification, adoption, and sanctification?

**A. [A]ssurance of God's love,
peace of conscience,
joy in the Holy Ghost,
increase of grace,
and perseverance therein to the end.⁶**

Prayers of the People

Trusting in that love, that peace, that joy, and that grace, let us lift now the prayers of this day to God:

God of Grace and God of Glory,
you have poured your power on your people.
We pray now in your holy name,
as generations have prayed before us,
for the joys and concerns of our days,
knowing that you care for great and small.

We pray for creation,
for the earth and all its wonders.
We pray with joy for the changing of the seasons,
the beauty of the leaves and cooler days.
We pray for your mercy on those who battle the forces of nature,
for victims of hurricanes and earthquakes,
for those who cannot access clean water
or find shelter from the elements.

We pray for the life of the nations,
ours included.
We pray for leaders and those in power,
that they may use that power on behalf of the powerless,
seek tolerance and compromise,
listen for the wisdom of your guidance,
and exercise mutual respect.
We pray for an end to state-based violence,
that we might see our way
to a different kind of future.

We pray today for the church,
as it gathers in a million different forms.
We pray for megachurches and house churches,

for congregations gathered in historic cathedrals and in strip mall store fronts
for the church on every continent,
for Christians of every denomination and tradition,
for the deeply committed and those on the brink of faith.
We pray that in our diversity all might find a home that fits them,
and that we might remember our ultimate unity in you
a unity born of your love,
and work towards reconciliation,
towards becoming your one church in the world,
your one body here on earth.

We pray for those who struggle today
because of illness, or grief,
lack of opportunity, or lack of resources,
abuse, oppression, malaise,
hopelessness or helplessness.
We pray that you would show us
what spiritual gifts we might offer each one
that we might be mutually encouraged:
healing for the sick, comfort for the grieving,
love for the lonely and support for the beaten-down,
food for the hungry and faith for the lost.
By your grace, soothe suffering,
and bring renewal in tired lives.

We pray now for those close to our hearts...

We lift all these and every other prayer to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer.

And now we pray as Jesus taught us, saying, **Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.**

AND ALWAYS BEING REFORMED...

Historians talk about the Reformation as a closed era in the past, but we who tell God's story know that God is always forming and re-forming the church. We are jumping forward now, to the modern confessions, that wrestle with a changing world. Let's set the scene with a few refrains of Spirit of the Living God, written by a Presbyterian pastor in Tarboro, North Carolina in 1935.

***Song "Spirit of the Living God"**

Barmen Confession

It was 1934, and the Nazi Party was on the rise in Germany, initiating a reign of cruelty, hate, and terror. Most German Christians found no problem with Hitler's actions, declaring that their faith and their patriotism went hand in hand, and that Hitler's rule was God's will. A few Christians, however, resisted. Representatives from the Reformed, Lutheran, and United churches gathered to create a confession of faith to send to their fellow German Christians, urging them to display their freedom in Christ by standing firm against Hitler's designs for Germany. While our situation is not theirs, we confess the eternal truth that the church was not meant to be co-opted by political forces, but clings only to Christ. Listen to the words of our ancestors:

The Christian Church is the congregation of the people
in which Jesus Christ acts presently as the Lord
in Word and Sacrament
through the Holy Spirit.
As the Church of pardoned sinners,
it has to testify in the midst of a sinful world,
with its faith as with its obedience,
with its message as with its order,
that it is solely his property,
and that it lives and wants to live
solely from his comfort and from his direction
in the expectation of his appearance.

We reject the false doctrine,
as though the church were permitted
to abandon the form of its message and order
to its own pleasure or to changes
in prevailing ideological and political convictions.⁷

Confession of 1967

The 1960s turned America upside down (some of you remember those days!). In the midst of so many different cultural tensions and conflicts, the northern Presbyterian Church adopted a new confession based around the idea that in Christ, the whole world is reconciled to God. Listen to the words of our ancestors:

God's redeeming work in Jesus Christ
embraces the whole of humanity's life:
social and cultural,
economic and political,
scientific and technological,
individual and corporate.
It includes humanity's natural environment
as exploited and despoiled by sin.
It is the will of God that his purpose for human life
shall be fulfilled under the rule of Christ
and all evil be banished from his creation.

Biblical visions and images of the rule of Christ,
such as a heavenly city, a father's house,
a new heaven and earth, a marriage feast,
and an unending day culminate
in the image of the kingdom.

The kingdom represents the triumph of God
over all that resists his will and disrupts his creation.
Already God's reign is present as a ferment in the world,
stirring hope in people and preparing the world
to receive its ultimate judgment and redemption.

With an urgency born of this hope,
the church applies itself to present tasks
and strives for a better world.
It does not identify limited progress
with the kingdom of God on earth,
nor does it despair in the face of disappointment and defeat.
In steadfast hope, the church looks beyond all partial achievement
to the final triumph of God.⁸

Belhar Confession

It was 1986, and apartheid, the separation and treatment of people based on race, raged in South Africa. Some white Christians used scripture to justify this system, and so the Dutch Reformed Church wrote the Belhar Confession in protest, insisting that God's vision for humanity was one of liberation, equality, unity, and communion. Let us listen to the words of our ancestors, translated to English from the original Afrikaans.

We believe

- that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;
- that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged;
- that God calls the church to follow him in this, for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry;
- that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind;
- that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly;
- that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering;
- that God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right;
- that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;

- that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.⁹

In celebration of these truths, let us stand and sing our final song, “Siyahamba, We Are Marching in the Light of God,” a song that emerged in South Africa in the 1950s.

***Song** “We Are Marching in the Light of God”

Benediction: A Brief Statement of Faith

It was 1983, and the Northern and Southern Presbyterian churches in America had just reunited. Presbyterians celebrated this new church and its future with a new confession, written for use in worship. A Brief Statement of Faith reminds us that the church is not meant to be a hiding place *from* the world, but a blessing *to* the world. And so, as we go forth to carry on the legacy of our ancestors, and to write a new chapter in God’s story, let us use the words of our ancestors as today’s charge. They are printed in your bulletin:

**In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples
to Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others
for justice, freedom, and peace.
In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God’s new heaven and new earth,
praying, “Come, Lord Jesus!”¹⁰**

As you go forth from this place,
go with the love of God who created you
the peace of Christ you saved you,
and the Holy Spirit who reforms, renews, and refreshes you,
today, tomorrow, and evermore. Amen.

Postlude

A few notes on using this service:

- ❖ This resource is covered under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial License (CC-BY-NC 4.0), meaning you are welcome to share or adapt it in any format where you're not making money. However, you should attribute this service to Rev. Carol Holbrook Prickett, either verbally or in writing, and indicate whether or not you adapted it. That's all it takes!
- ❖ While a single voice can lead the entire service, it might be more helpful to split the text between a "narrator" and a "confessor" who reads the confessional excerpts. If you are in a congregation with lots of readers, each era of confessions or even each confession itself could have a separate "confessor."
- ❖ Because this service has the opportunity to be deathly boring, encourage your readers to use as natural a voice as possible when bringing the confessions to life, rather than a monotone.
- ❖ For extra fun, encourage your "confessors" to dress in costume—a belted robe like an alb for the early confessions, an academic robe for the Reformation confessions, and a suit for the modern confessions. (This is particularly appropriate when Reformation Sunday lands near Halloween).
- ❖ While this service is not terribly child friendly, a children's sermon could be inserted after the confession of sins on why it is important to tell family stories.
- ❖ If you or your congregation use this service and find it meaningful, I'd love to hear from you! Drop me a line at revcarol@cspresby.com. And happy Reforming!

All confessional excerpts are from *The PC(USA) Book of Confessions*. Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2016. They have been lightly modernized with inclusive terms for humankind.

¹ The Nicene Creed.

² The Scots Confession 3.16.

³ The Heidelberg Catechism 4.001.

⁴ The Second Helvetic Confession 5.112-113.

⁵ Shorter Westminster Catechism 7.001.

⁶ Shorter Westminster Catechism 7.033-7.036.

⁷ The Barmen Declaration 8.17-8.18.

⁸ The Confession of 1967 9.53-9.55.

⁹ The Belhar Confession 10.7.

¹⁰ A Brief Statement of Faith 11.4.