

Article of Faith: The Creeds
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Acts 15: 1 – 35 *The Council at Jerusalem*

¹ Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” ² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. ³ So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵ But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.”

⁶ The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. ⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. ⁸ And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; ⁹ and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. ¹⁰ Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

¹² The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. ¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied, “My brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name.

¹⁵ This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,

¹⁶ ‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, ¹⁷ so that all other peoples may seek the Lord— even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things ¹⁸ known from long ago.’

¹⁹ Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰ but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. ²¹ For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.”

²² Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers, ²³ with the following

letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. ²⁴ Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, ²⁵ we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

³⁰ So they were sent off and went down to Antioch. When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. ³¹ When its members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation. ³² Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. ³³ After they had been there for some time, they were sent off in peace by the believers to those who had sent them. ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, and there, with many others, they taught and proclaimed the word of the Lord.

In early (earliest) Christianity there were many different thoughts about what it meant to be a follower, a disciple of Jesus Christ.

For some, it meant they were still Jewish. Because Jesus was Jewish.

For others, Jesus was entirely separate.

And for still others, Jesus was just one more prophet to be added to a pantheon of Gods.

Did it make a difference which camp you fell in? What WAS the Good News?

These earliest leaders felt a tremendous sense of responsibility to do what they needed to do in order to preserve and pass on the Good News Jesus had proclaimed.

They believed that the future of what Jesus had entrusted to them was in the balance.

It was not insignificant.

What was this first presenting issue, exactly?

The issue that came to the forefront first was:

Did new believers who had not been Jewish previously need to become Jewish in order to become Christian. Circumcision, but more than circumcision. Jewish practice. Law. Worship.

And beneath this an even deeper question for these earliest believers who don't think Gentiles can follow Jesus.... Can people of other backgrounds and experiences ever REALLY understand what it means to follow Jesus, or did God come for just a few? Can you ever really trust the other?

The stakes were high. The opinions strong. Leaders substantial. Battle lines formed. And people were invested.

But what happened next is pretty remarkable. Instead this entire situation escalating, or leading to a schism, these earliest got together and talked about it. They prayed about it. They listened to their brothers and sisters in faith. And the Holy Spirit worked with them.

Together, over time, they realized that placing limits on God wasn't what needed to be done. If the Holy Spirit was calling these gentiles, how could they argue against that?

How could they point to a doorway in the wall when God was tearing down the entire wall?

In 2001 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) created a "Peace, Unity, and Purity" task force and asked them to meet together for the next three years and "prepare a report that would lead the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century."¹

This task force was asked to provide a way forward through some of the greatest theological divisions of the day. "biblical authority and interpretation, Christology, ordination standards, and power."

The stakes were high. The opinions strong. Leaders substantial. Battle lines formed. And people were invested.

The task force was diverse in every way that it could be, and I for one didn't see how they were going to find a unified way forward.

For the next few years they met, and for the next few years we waited.

But do you know how they did? Instead of jumping right in to their divisions, they began by worshipping together. By studying together. Before they started talking about who was right and who was wrong, they found common ground together, and grew in relationship. And by the end of their time together they were largely unified in charting a way forward that relied not on their own wisdom but the same wisdom of the generations that had come before, especially and considerably that of the Jerusalem Council, when the people listened for and then got out of the way of the Holy Spirit.²

All of this is an incredibly long introduction, from the 1st to the 21st centuries, showing how the church has, across the years, handled disagreement and formulated ways to articulate what it believes, and why it believes that.

¹ https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/peace-unity-purity-final-report-revised-english.pdf

² <http://pres-outlook.org/2002/03/task-force-on-peace-unity-and-purity-starts-slowly-writes-a-mission-statement/>
<http://covnetpres.org/2009/11/and-grace-will-lead-me-home/>

Which is instructive today. For the church, for sure, which still finds ways to disagree, but even more for our country and our world, which seems so very, very polarized and divided.

Which brings us to today's article of Faith, The Book of Confessions. What is a confession? In this context it isn't the naming of sins it is the statement of what we believe. And our book, not an accessory to but an integral part of our church's constitution, starts with the Nicene Creed, words prepared at the time of Constantine, when Christianity shifted from being an out-law to a state religion and detailed agreed became important.³

"We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ... Eternal begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God."

The Apostles' Creed. A Creed that far outdates the Presbyterian Church itself, going back to the roots of the church itself, with words new believers were asked to recite as their statement of faith to join the church, often on Easter, at the end of a year-long season of preparation.

"I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth."

Jumping forward, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg in 1517. John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion were published in 1536. The denominations these movements formed soon began to need to state their own identity.

As a result the 1560s, we see

The Scots Confession, on the occasion of the first assembly in Scotland, and a clear attempt to state where their mother church, the Roman Catholic church, was incomplete, incorrect, and what made the two different.

"We most sure believe that God preserved, instructed, multiplied, honored, adorned, and called from death to life his Kirk in all ages."

The Heidelberg Catechism and the Second Helvetic Confession, clarifying reformed beliefs about the sacraments and other elements of faith.

"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."

³ For all of the confessions except for Belhar, I have relied on "Book of Confessions: Study Edition," (Louisville: Geneva Press) 1996.

“We are baptized with water. And therefore we are baptized, that is, washed or sprinkled with visible water. For the water washes dirt away, and cools and refreshed hot and tired bodies. And the grace of God performs these things for souls, and does so invisibly or spiritually.”

In the 17th century brings the development of the Westminster Confession of Faith, and both the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. These sought to be less bound by history and more affirmative statements of theology and practice.

What is the chief end of man?

Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

What is adoption?

Adoption is an act of the free grace of God, in and for his only Son Jesus Christ, whereby all those that are justified are received into the number of his children, have his name put upon them, the Spirit of his Son given to them, are under his fatherly care and dispensations, admitted to all the liberties and privileges of the sons of God, made heirs of all the promises, and fellow-heirs with Christ in glory.

In the 1930s, in Germany, as Hitler rose to power there were churches that saw him as a divinely chosen leader. Who agreed with his ideas about purity. Who welcomed, what they perceived to be, a closer relationship between the church and the state. Who saw the arrival of military flags to their sanctuaries as a victory and not a defeat. They were called, appropriately, “German Christians.” And they were not in the minority. Out of that time arose an opposition movement- the Confessing Church- that spoke of Christians, not German Christians, and it became known as the “Theological Declaration of Barmen.”

“We reject the false doctrine, as though the church, over and beyond its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the State, thus itself becoming an organ of the state.”

The 1960s was a season of protest great volatility in the nations and the church at the time thought that the word that should be spoken was one of Christ’s power for reconciliation, and the witness the church should provide in troubling times. The Confession of 1967 is the result of that.

“God has created the peoples of the earth to be one universal family. In his reconciling love, he overcomes the barriers between brothers and breaks down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference, real or imaginary.”

In 1983 something significant happened in the church- an actual reconciliation. In 1859, 124 years before, the Presbyterian church had split north and south. The Civil War would end in 1865 but it would take the Presbyterian Church another 118 years to find their way back together. When they did, the largest issue before them was no longer slavery, it was the ordination of women as deacons, elders, and ministers of Word and Sacrament. Some Southern churches couldn't accept that God calls women to ministry and so they left to form the Presbyterian Church of America. But for the majority who came together, it was a significant moment, and the denomination decided to write a new Statement of Faith- not about division but about reunion, and the power of God.

Loving us still, God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant. Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still.

And finally, the Confession of Belhar. Written in 1986 but only added to our Book of Confessions by the approval of 2/3 of the presbyteries in 2016, "*The Confession of Belhar* was written as a protest against a heretical theological stance by the white Dutch Reformed Church that supported Apartheid. Apartheid is the human context for the Confession of Belhar, yet it is never mentioned in the confession. Rather, Belhar lifts up the heart of the Gospel as a bringer of hope for the human condition."⁴

"We believe... that any teaching which attempts to legitimate such forced separation by appeal to the gospel, and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine."

Now. Why did I want to talk about the Confessions in light of the Jerusalem Council?

Because these creeds, these statements are our foundation. Not that we still find every word to be gospel. We may no longer have their arguments or face their issues, but these words tell the story of people who have sought to live faithful lives.

The Creeds, our Confessions, are an article of Faith not because they are perfect, but precisely because they are not. And in them we can find wisdom, and truth, and hope for the facing of these days.

For these days seem, to me, like some of the days that brought forth these words, days of great turmoil and question. And I'm not always sure how to proceed to seek what the Gospel calls for, peace, justice, and reconciliation. It's hard to even have a civil

⁴ https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/the_belhar_confession-rogers-attribution.pdf

conversation about current events any more. And I will be the first to confess that I am not always very good at navigating the most important conversations with those with whom I disagree. Too often the desire to be right stands in front of the call to be faithful.

But I don't apologize for the attempts, and I fear too many of us, myself included at times, are simply withdrawing from the conversation because we don't know how to have them. Or don't see out others who have different outlooks, experiences, and perspectives.

I'm talking about national issues, but this is no less true for personal issues. Families that are struggling. Relationships that are fractured. Cracks in a unity that have been allowed to grow into sinkholes. Parenting that is so, freaking hard and being a child in the 21st century, that may be even harder than parenting, topped only in difficulty by aging.

And there are no obvious answers to how to fix it, whether the it is the economy or health care or your situation in life.

Friends, today let's accept the challenge of this Article of Faith, not to be perfect,
but to be present and passionate.

Not to discuss politicians, but ideas and values.

Let's talk about health care and immigration.

What it means to be fearful of terrorism, rational or not.

What prejudices seem so widespread, and are deeply rooted within our own hearts?

What responsibility do we have for one another?

How do we remain faithful to the promises we make,
and what do you do when your world is shattered?

Let us commit to having the big conversations
where dreams are shared,
listening happens,
and tables are gathered around.

Because we aren't here on our own. We stand in a long line of faithful women and men who have dared to have those conversations, because Jesus dared. To ask Peter if he loved him. To tell the gathered crowd to put down their stones. To weep at the death of the friend. To claim time to listen and pray. And always pointing to the never ceasing love of God.

Let us remember that we do not need, we must not commit the folly of thinking we are in this on our own when we have accessible to us the strength of generations of children of God who have come before us. A strength accessible to us in these words, written and repeated across the years, today's article of faith, the creeds that threads us together still.

Thanks be to God. Amen.