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**Still Reforming:
The Need for a New Confession in the
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**

By
Matthew W. Bussell

Claremont Graduate University
2022

Approval of the Dissertation Committee

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Matthew W. Bussell as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Religion.

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Abstract

Still Reforming: The Need for a New Confession in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

By

Matthew W. Bussell

Claremont Graduate University: 2022

Within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) the creeds and confessions collected in the *Book of Confessions* articulate not only the doctrines of the church, but also the identity and purpose of the denomination. The *Book of Confessions* contains twelve documents from different periods in the history of the church, each of them addressing the experience of the church in their unique contexts. As the church looks to move into the future following God's calling, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is called to rearticulate its faith, identity, and purpose through the writing of a confession with an inclusive anthropology and missional ecclesiology. This new confession would build on the previous creeds and confessions of the church, particularly the Belhar Confession and the Brief Statement of Faith.

In exploring this calling to write a new confession in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), it is necessary to understand how the creeds and confessions function within the life of the church. When ministers, elders, and deacons are ordained and installed by the church they promise to be guided and instructed by the creeds and confessions of the church and that they affirm the "essential tenets" therein. This language of essential tenets has been carefully crafted by the church to ensure that its leaders share the same core faith while allowing differences of interpretation on non-essential doctrines.

In June of 2022 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will be tasked with discerning whether or not the church is called to write a new confession. As the General Assembly goes about this work of discernment, it is helpful to understand why the church has

been called to write other confessions. A close study of the four confessional documents in the *Book of Confessions* from the twentieth century (The Theological Declaration of Barmen, The Confession of 1967, The Belhar Confession, and A Brief Statement of Faith), reveals that the church has chosen to write new confessions to confront contemporary heresies and to shape the identity of the church in the present and future.

As we look at the present situation of the church, it is clear that the church is called to write a new confession for both of the reasons new confessions were written in the twentieth century. Contemporary heresies of racism, heterosexism, and sexism deny the full humanity of people in the world today, distorting not only our understanding of humanity but of the God who created all people in God's image. Additionally, the contemporary heresy of Christian nationalism intertwines faith in God and devotion to nation, making an idol of the nation. These heresies distort and corrupt the gospel. As the church moves into the future it is called to counter these theological distortions by articulating an inclusive anthropology in a new confession.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) also needs a new confession to clarify its identity and purpose. The church is in a period of transition as it continues to decline numerically and as it navigates the rapidly evolving world in which we live. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the life of the church but has also led the church to adapt in unprecedented ways. The writing of a new confession would enable the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to articulate its identity and purpose in a missional ecclesiology which focuses the life of the church outward into the community and world.

There is a fear, though, that the writing of a new confession with an inclusive anthropology and missional ecclesiology will cause division in the church. While well intended, the call for unity above all else in the church can be used to maintain unjust systems and

structures which benefit those in power. Unity cannot become an idol for the church. The writing of a new confession would not seek to divide the church but build unity amidst the diversity of the church.

Within the creeds and confessions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) there is an explicit acknowledgement that new confessions will be needed by the church in the future. Neither the church nor the world are static and the church is called to speak to the world in which it exists. The writing of a new confession would see the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) living into the Reformed motto *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*: Reformed and always reforming.

Preface

I was ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) on March 13, 2016. At my ordination I made several promises, including that I sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions and that I would be instructed and led by those confessions. I took that promise seriously and decided to study the creeds and confessions of the church again having not looked at them closely since graduating from Columbia Theological Seminary several years earlier. This study rekindled in me my love of the Reformed creeds and confessions, but also revealed to me the need for a new confession to be written. There was much left unsaid and some things which the church had changed its mind about over the course of the years.

As a new minister I figured others who were much more established in the ministry surely saw the same need for a new confession and I hoped that these pillars of the church would sound the call for the church to undertake the writing of a new confession. Yet no call came forth. As a new minister I never considered the possibility of me being the one to sound the call. I was working on my Ph.D. while starting my work in congregational ministry and raising my toddler daughter. Surely the call to write a new confession should come from someone else.

Over three years later, in the summer of 2019, my sense that the church was called to write a new confession shifted from a simmer to a boil. I researched how overtures, requests for business for the PC(USA)'s General Assembly, were done and put together a rough draft of an overture for the General Assembly to create a committee to write a new confession. Having never been involved in the business of General Assembly I was not quite sure what to do next or how it would be received by the church, so I sent the draft of the overture to the Reverend Doctor Leslie Belden. Leslie was not only a colleague in ministry whose opinion I valued but also the

Stated Clerk, the official record keeper and parliamentarian, of the Presbytery of Arkansas. Somewhat to my amazement, Leslie was enthusiastic about my overture and proceeded to walk me through the process of getting it to the General Assembly. The overture calling for a new confession went to the presbytery's polity committee and coordinating team before being presented and approved by the Presbytery of Arkansas on October 5, 2019. With concurrences from three other presbyteries, the overture was added to the agenda for the 2020 General Assembly. Much to my surprise it was not the only call for a new confession to be written. The General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations (GACEIR) was issuing a similar call based on their dialogues with other denominations and faiths. However, due to the pandemic the overture was deferred to the 2022 General Assembly.

When I talk to people about the overture to write a new confession, both those who support and oppose it, the question I am almost always asked is: "Why did you write the overture?" My answer is quite simple: to help lead the church into God's vision for the church. In serving as a minister of congregation, participating on presbytery committees, and writing this overture I am working to bring the church into the future to which God is calling it.

At the heart of this vision and future is an inclusive anthropology and missional ecclesiology. An inclusive anthropology means acknowledging and celebrating the humanity of all people. For centuries the church, including the PC(USA), has denied the full humanity, the *imago Dei*, of women, people of color, and the LGBTQIA+ community. In the Brief Statement of Faith, the most recent creedal statement of the PC(USA) which was adopted in 1991, the church acknowledges that it is a sin to deny the image of God in others and ourselves. Building on this statement, a new confession would articulate a theological understanding of what it means to be human which includes all people.

A missional ecclesiology is an understanding of the church focused on its engagement with the world. Going back to its origins in the Protestant Reformation, the Reformed tradition has focused on doctrines, what people and the church believe, rather than on praxis, what people and the church do. As the church moves into its future it is called to focus its attention on joining the work that God is doing in the world.

The goal of this dissertation is to make the argument that the PC(USA) is called to write a new confession with an inclusive anthropology and missional ecclesiology. But the dissertation really goes beyond that; it is my work of helping the church align itself with God's vision for the church and the world. I want to thank my dissertation committee, Dr. Grace Kao, Dr. Philip Clayton, and Dr. Kevin Wolfe, for working with me to strengthen and clarify my work. Their feedback and insight have been invaluable as I have worked to complete the dissertation and as I prepare to make the case for a new confession to be written at the upcoming General Assembly. I also would like to thank the Rev. Dr. Leslie Belden for encouraging and supporting me through the overture process and the Presbytery of Arkansas for discussing and approving the overture. I offer special thanks to my daughter Meier, who inspires my every day to work for God's vision for the church so that whoever she is and whoever she becomes, she will find a church which expresses God's love for her. Finally, words cannot express the gratitude I have for my wife Bekah, who has constantly supported me throughout this process, believing in me in my times of doubt and uncertainty, listening to me as I have tried to work things out, and celebrating with me the progress that has been made.

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Introduction

Jesus' message is that all persons are created by God and are welcome in God's household.

– Letty Russell, *Church in the Round*

The church does not have a mission; rather, it participates in God's Mission in the redemption of humanity and the restoration of all creation.

– Letty Russell, *Church in the Round*

Hospitality is the practice of God's welcome by reaching across differences to participate in God's actions bringing justice and healing to our world in crisis.

– Letty Russell, *Just Hospitality*

[T]he ministry of service to humankind is the ministry of God in Christ reconciling the world. The church is invited to participate in that ministry. Yet in many churches the minister's job is perceived to be taking care of the flock, rather than equipping the saints for their service in the world. I have long wondered why the church is so preoccupied with what is *inside* itself, and forgets God's concern for justice or putting things right in the world; our table of hospitality is only for the insiders.

– Letty Russell, *Just Hospitality*

Through her work as a Christian educator, minister, and theology professor, Letty Russell was active in making the church more inclusive and missional. She was a life-long Presbyterian who experienced exclusion in the church she loved, first because of her gender and later because of her sexuality.¹ Yet amidst the barriers placed in her way, Russell continued working to reform the church to bring it into greater alignment with God's vision. Over the last seventy years, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has slowly worked to remove the barriers Russell faced and make the church more inclusive.² It has changed its restrictions on ordination to allow women and LGBTQIA+ individuals to be ordained to all offices of the church and it has broadened its

¹ Russell was married to the Dutch ecumenical theologian Hans Hoekendijk until his death in 1975. In 2005, Russell and her partner Shannon Clarkson were joined in a civil union.

² Throughout this work, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will be referred to using the acronym PC(USA).

definition of marriage beyond simply between a man and a woman. Unfortunately, Russell did not live to see the church embrace LGBTQIA+ ordination and marriage as she died before these changes took place.³

While the PC(USA) has come a long way since Russell started working in the church as a Christian educator in 1952, there is still much reforming work to be done. Racism, heterosexism, sexism, and Christian nationalism persist in the church and society, denying the full humanity of many of God's children. The church has also grown increasingly inward focused and forgotten its calling to go into the world to make a difference. As the church looks to the future and discerns how it is called to join God's work in the world, the PC(USA) should return to the insight of Letty Russell and work to make the church more inclusive and missional. Reforms which started in the Belhar Confession and the Brief Statement of Faith can be built upon and expanded in the writing of a new inclusive and missional confession. The PC(USA) is called to write a new confession focused on an inclusive anthropology and a missional ecclesiology.

Going back to the Protestant Reformation the ongoing reform of the church has been characteristic of the Reformed tradition as exemplified in the Reformed motto: *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*. Reformed and always reforming. Or perhaps better: reformed and always being reformed. This motto speaks to our history of reformation, led by pillars of our tradition such as John Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli, and John Knox, while also pointing the church to the future as it recognizes the ongoing need for reformation in the church. In many places, this motto is completed with a clarification about Scripture guiding the ongoing work of reformation so that it reads in full: *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum dei*: "reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God." Properly understood, the reforms of

³ Letty Russell died in 2007 while the PC(USA) did not change its ordination standards until 2011 and its definition of marriage until 2015.

the Reformed tradition are undertaken through the discernment of Scripture. Scripture guides and directs the reforms. This guidance, the church trusts, is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. The passive voice of the Reformed motto signals the primacy of God in the process of Reformation. Anna Case-Winters, professor of Reformed theology at McCormick Theological Seminary, observes: “God is the agent of reformation. The church is rather the object of God’s reforming work.”⁴ While we participate in the ongoing reformation of the church, it is God who directs and leads this process. To ensure that the church is reforming in accordance to the will of God, the Reformed church utilizes councils where leaders discern together the call and will of God.

At the heart of the Reformed tradition is the awareness that God continues to do new things in the church. According to Jerry Andrews, moderator of the former conservative advocacy group the Presbyterian Coalition, “We are the Reformed. By this we mean that God has been at work among us; we have been reformed. And we mean by this that we are liable to further reformation. God is still at work among us; we are being reformed. We are the reformed and always being reformed.”⁵ This tradition of reformation and frame of discerning God’s ongoing call to reformation is a gift to the PC(USA), the largest Reformed denomination in the United States, as the church confronts a daunting series of crises which includes declining church participation, the COVID-19 pandemic, systematic racism, structural poverty, and climate change. Fahed Abu-Akel, moderator of the 214th General Assembly, helpfully writes:

Radical changes in our world challenge us to review the historic role of Presbyterians within the Reformed tradition and our place as members of the church universal. These winds of change rattle our stained-glass windows and threaten the comfort of our pews and plans. But we must not forget that the wind of the Holy Spirit also blows. That wind can give us the mind of Christ to guide

⁴ Anna Case-Winters, “*Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda: Reformed and Always to Be Reformed*,” in *Presbyterians Being Reformed: Reflections on What the Church Needs Today*, ed. Robert H. Bullock Jr. (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2006), xxx.

⁵ Jerry Andrews, “The Church Is Corrigible,” in *Presbyterians Being Reformed: Reflections on What the Church Needs Today*, ed. Robert H. Bullock Jr. (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2006), 70.

and serve our church and generation faithfully. Technology, a growing global economy, and a world punctuated by major hot spots of conflict, terrorism, hunger, and recent natural disasters demand that we listen better to Holy Spirit if we hope to meet both the obvious and the unforeseen challenges of the real world in which we live.⁶

As the world around us changes, the church is called to adapt in order to continue to speak relevantly to the world. One of the ways in which the Reformed church in general and the PC(USA) in particular speaks to the world is through our creeds and confessions which address the questions of faith within their own unique contexts.

Within the Reformed tradition we understand that new confessions and creeds are needed as our faith is not static. According to leading 20th century Presbyterian theologian Shirley Guthrie, “In the Reformed tradition confessions have a temporary, provisional, and relative authority (and are therefore subject to revision and correction) because scripture bears witness to a living God who not only spoke and acted in the distant past but continues to speak and act in every time and place.”⁷ The church is called to continually be reforming and reformed, clarifying what we believe and how we practice our faith as the church and the world change. German Reformed theologian and former faculty at Columbia Theological Seminary Margit Ernst-Habib writes:

[C]onfessions within the Reformed tradition are meant to be used, not to be admired, and certainly not to be taken for granted or buried. Reformed attention to confessions and confession making is unique within the family of Christian denominations. Reformed churches never stopped writing new confessions for new times and places, as *The Book of Confessions* demonstrates. They do so because of the famous principle ‘Reformed but always being reformed according to the Word of God,’ which means that God’s Word is the reason, ground, and

⁶ Fahed Abu-Akel, “A Global Presbyterian Witness for a Global World Community,” in *Presbyterians Being Reformed: Reflections on What the Church Needs Today*, ed. Robert H. Bullock Jr. (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2006), 91.

⁷ Shirley C. Guthrie, *Always Being Reformed: Faith for a Fragmented World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 29.

principle for the ongoing confession of faith that shapes the ongoing reformation the church.⁸

The writing of a new confession is not a break from the Reformed tradition, but a faithful expression of the reformed faith.

As we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, the church has reached the point where it is once more called to write a new confession with an inclusive anthropology and missional confession. According to the World Communion of Reformed Churches, “We live in apocalyptic times. The triad of the COVID-19 pandemic, racism and authoritarianism, and the climate crisis has not only placed our planet in a perilous predicament, but it also presents itself as *kairotic* moment for the Church. This is both in terms of the Church’s own self-understanding but also its mission.”⁹ It goes on to say that it has discerned “that we are at the brink of a significant moment that necessitated deep theological thinking and reflection. A moment that has become even more apparent as the apocalypse of the pandemic unveils for us the deep inequalities that we are living in.”¹⁰ For the World Communion of Reformed Church, theological thinking and reflection is needed as the church discerns how to speak to the church and world amidst our current crises. A new confession would spur that theological thinking and reflection and guide what the church says to the world.

At the 225th General Assembly (2022), the PC(USA) will be tasked with discerning whether it is called to write a new confession as part of its ongoing process of being reformed.¹¹

⁸ Margit Ernst-Habib, “A Conversation with Twentieth-Century Confessions,” in *Conversations with the Confessions: Dialogue in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Joseph D. Small (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2005), 70.

⁹ World Communion of Reformed Churches, *What Does God Require of Us? Discerning, Confessing, and Witnessing in the Time of COVID-19 and Beyond*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Two proposals have been sent to the General Assembly regarding the writing of a new confession, one an overture from the Presbytery of Arkansas written by me and the other as a recommendation from the General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations. A detailed description of how a new confession is added to the PC(USA)’s *Book of Confessions* is found in chapter 1.

This dissertation explores the need for a new inclusive and missional confession by looking at the confessional nature of the PC(USA), the history the writing of confessions in the 20th century included in the *Book of Confessions*, and the issues facing the church today.

In chapter 1 we will look at the confessional nature of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). This will provide the necessary foundation for understanding the role of the creeds and confessions in the PC(USA). Here we will look at how the creeds and confessions shape not only our theology, but also our polity, liturgy, and mission. Included in this chapter is a discussion of key polity issues including the history and role of “essential tenets” and the process for amending the *Book of Confessions*. The reform of the church is an ongoing process as the church discerns its identity, mission, and how to speak to the world in its present context. The writing of new creeds and confessions plays a central role in the ongoing reform of the church.

In chapter 2 we will turn our attention to the development of the four documents in the *Book of Confessions* from the 20th century: The Theological Declaration of Barmen, the Confession of 1967, the Belhar Confession, and A Brief Statement of Faith. Here we will focus not so much on the content of these works, but on why they were written. As the church explores the possibility of writing a new confession, it is helpful to understand how and why the church discerned to write new confessional statements in the past. The twentieth Century confessions were written to address false teachings of the church and to build the identity and purpose of the church. In each of the confessions the church builds upon the Reformed tradition to speak to its context. The writing of a new inclusive and missional confession would build on these previous confessions as the church seeks to speak in its current context.

In chapter 3 we will look at how a new confession could lead the PC(USA) in responding to heresies prevalent in contemporary American society, most notably sexism, heterosexism,

racism and Christian nationalism. Sexism, heterosexism, and racism work to deny the full humanity and the *imago dei* of individuals deemed “other” while Christian nationalism commits idolatry by merging faith in God with allegiance to the nation. A new confession would build on the twentieth Century creeds and confessions to speak to the contemporary situation of American society and the church with an inclusive anthropology. Racism, heterosexism, sexism, and Christian nationalism are inconsistent with Reformed theology, distorting not only our understanding of human nature but also our view of the God who creates people in God’s own image. A new confession with an inclusive anthropology would deepen our understanding of what it means to be human and enrich our knowledge of God.

In chapter 4 we will look at the value of writing a new confession as the church shifts its focus away from doctrinal statements to the mission of the church. This chapter will explore how the church is in a period of transition and how a new confession with a missional ecclesiology could provide the church with clarity in its mission and identity. A new confession with a missional ecclesiology will guide and inspire the church as it joins the mission of God in the world.

In chapter 5 we will look at the concern for unity in the church, particularly the concern that the writing of a new confession could lead to further division in the PC(USA). In this chapter we will look at how the call for unity has been used manipulatively and destructively in the church before turning to a more inclusive and constructive understanding of church unity. A new confession would build unity in the church by welcoming all people with its inclusive anthropology and by joining the church in a common purpose with its missional ecclesiology. As the church moves forward into God’s future it is called to seek unity amidst diversity and imitate Jesus’ boundary-defying movement.

Finally, in chapter 6 we will return to the church's call to continuing reform and the new life the writing of a new confession with an inclusive anthropology and missional ecclesiology could bring to the PC(USA).

Chapter 1: The Confessional Nature of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

When people are ordained or installed as ministers, elders, or deacons in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), they are required to answer ten ordination questions as vows.¹² The final question is different for each office, reflecting the different ministries of the offices, but the other questions are the same for ministers, elders, and deacons. The fourth question reads: “Will you fulfill your ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?”¹³ It builds on the first three questions which require faith in Jesus Christ, the acceptance of the authority of Scripture, and the reception of the Reformed confessions as guides to Scripture and faith. According to Joseph Small, the former Coordinator of the PC(USA)’s Office of Theology and Worship, “It is important to note that the three elements of the vow are not separate, but fundamentally interrelated. Obedience to Christ is primary, but since we do not have direct, unmediated access to Christ’s will, the shape of obedience to Christ is most reliably known in and through Scripture. In turn, the confessions are dependable guides to the understanding of Scripture.”¹⁴

¹² The *Book of Order* describes the ministry of elders as, “together with ministers of Word and Sacrament, exercise leadership, government, spiritual discernment, and discipline and have responsibilities for the life of a congregation as well as the whole church” (*The Book of Order: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part II* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2019), G-2.0301, 27). The *Book of Order* describes the ministry of deacons as “one of compassion, witness, and service, sharing in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lost, the friendless, the oppressed, those burdened by unjust policies or structures, or anyone in distress” (G-2.0201, 26.).

¹³ *The Book of Order*, W-4.0404, 104. It is important to note that the PC(USA) does not require acceptance of the church’s confessions for membership. All who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are welcome to join a PC(USA) congregation. The church does require ordained ministers, elders, and deacons to declare their adherence to the confessions of the church to ensure faithfulness to its doctrines and form of government. See: “Confessional Nature of the Church Report,” in *The Book of Confessions: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part I* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2016), xix.

¹⁴ Joseph D. Small, “Essential Tenets?,” in *Conversations with the Confessions: Dialogue in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Joseph D. Small (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2005), 224.

There is an unmistakable hierarchy of authority within the PC(USA), with Jesus Christ being the absolute authority over the church. The PC(USA) sees Scripture as witnessing to Jesus Christ. While Jesus Christ is the Word of God as the Second Person of the Trinity, Scripture is understood to be the Word of God insofar as it points to Jesus Christ. The creeds and confessions of the church, collected in the *Book of Confessions*, rank as the third tier of authority, as they are subordinate to Scripture. The Confession of 1967 makes this explicit when it states:

“Confessions and declarations are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him.”¹⁵ This is echoed by German Reformed theologian Margit Ernst-Habib when she writes: “The Reformed tradition has always maintained that no confession can take the place of God’s Word and claim authority that is rightly only God’s. Confessions are not the Word of God; they lead us to the Word of God.”¹⁶

The PC(USA) also includes a fourth tier of authority in the *Book of Order*, the document of the church which sets forth its governance and polity. The Constitution of the PC(USA) is made up of two parts: the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order*. Part I, the *Book of Confessions*, contains the official texts of the confessional documents: The Nicene Creed, The Apostles’ Creed, The Scots Confession, The Heidelberg Catechism, The Second Helvetic Confession, The Westminster Confession of Faith, The Westminster Shorter Catechism, The Westminster Larger Catechism, The Theological Declaration of Barmen, The Confession of 1967, The Confession of Belhar, and A Brief Statement of Faith—Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Part II, the *Book of Order*, has four sections: The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, the Form of Government, the Directory for Worship, and the Rules of Discipline. Jack Rogers, former

¹⁵ “The Confession of 1967,” in *The Book of Confessions: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part I* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2016), 9.03, 287.

¹⁶ Ernst-Habib, 72.

professor of theology at San Francisco Theological Seminary and moderator of the 213th General Assembly of the PC(USA), observes:

Presbyterians are people of three books. First is the Bible: It is the Word of God through which the Holy Spirit speaks to us of Jesus Christ on whom our faith is founded. Second is *The Book of Confessions*: It reflects a Reformed range of responses to the Word of God. Third is *The Book of Order*: In it Presbyterians attempt to outline practical principles of obedience to the Word of God. It is essential that we take all three of these books seriously. It is also necessary that we keep them in the right order of priority.¹⁷

For Presbyterians, the three books of Scripture, the *Book of Confessions*, and the *Book of Order* all are centered on God. Scripture witnesses to the person and acts of God; the *Book of Confessions* interprets Scripture and details our beliefs about God and creation; the *Book of Order* guides our life together as the people of God.

Essential Tenets

While the fourth ordination question establishes the relationship between Jesus Christ, Scripture, and the Reformed creeds and confessions, the third ordination question deals with the creeds and confessions in more detail. At their ordination and installation, ministers, elders, and deacons are asked: “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? Will you fulfill your ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?”¹⁸ Here we see the importance of the creeds and confessions in interpreting Scripture and guiding the life and

¹⁷ Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions*, with a foreword by Charles A. Hammond (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 282-3.

¹⁸ *The Book of Order*, W-4.0404, 103-4.

ministry of the church. The key phrase in this question which generates much confusion and discussion is “essential tenets.” The language of “essential tenets” in the Presbyterian church goes back to the Adopting Act of 1729.

In the early eighteenth century there was a belief among many American Presbyterians that orthodox Christian faith was under assault from the rationalist movement sweeping Europe and making its way to America. “The Reverend John Thomson argued that a denomination without a confessional standard was like a ‘city without walls.’ He wished to protect Presbyterians from the pernicious attacks of Deists on Christian faith and life. Therefore all clergy should subscribe to the Westminster Confession and catechisms as the expression of their beliefs and agree, under a public vow, to preach and teach such doctrine.”¹⁹ The Reverend Jonathan Dickinson responded Thomson by expressing his unease at the prospect of placing the work of the Westminster Assembly on an equal footing with the Bible.²⁰ Thomson and Dickinson quickly became leaders of the debate on the role of the Westminster Standards in the life of the church. In 1729, New Castle Presbytery asked the Synod of Philadelphia to follow the lead of Thomson and require subscription to the Westminster Standards. The debate over this proposal at the 1729 Synod was lengthy and passionate, but the church was able to reach a compromise called “The Adopting Act.” The Adopting Act of 1729 declares:

all the ministers of this Synod, or that shall hereafter be admitted into this Synod, shall declare their agreement in, and approbation of, the Confession Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, as being in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine, and do also adopt the said Confession and Catechisms as the confession of our faith. And we do also agree, that all the Presbyteries within our bounds shall always take care not to admit any candidate

¹⁹ James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1996), 45. See also John Thomson, “An Overture Presented to the Reverend Synod of Dissenting Ministers, 1729” in *The Presbyterian Experience in the United States*, ed. William Yoo (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).

²⁰ See Jonathan Dickinson, “A Sermon Preached at the Opening of the Synod at Philadelphia, 1722” in *The Presbyterian Experience in the United States*, ed. William Yoo (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).

of the ministry into the exercise of the sacred function but what declares his agreement in opinion with all the essential and necessary articles of said Confession, either by subscribing the said Confession of Faith and Catechisms, or by a verbal declaration of their assent thereto, as such minister or candidate shall think best. And in case any minister of this Synod, or any candidate for the ministry, shall have any scruple with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms, he shall at the time of his making said declaration declare his sentiments to the Presbytery or Synod, who shall, notwithstanding, admit him to the exercise of the ministry within our bounds, and to ministerial communion, if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to be only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government. But if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge such ministers or candidates erroneous in essential and necessary articles of faith, the Synod or Presbytery shall declare them incapable of communion with them.²¹

The Adopting Act of 1729 is an important compromise in the life of the church as it helped prevent church division. It provided the confessional standard sought by Thomson and others, while also providing flexibility for Dickinson. It requires subscription to the Westminster Standards in their “*essential and necessary articles*,” intentionally providing ministers and candidates the opportunity to declare their scruples with Westminster over non-essential articles. As the essential articles were not specified in the Adopting Act of 1729, it was the responsibility of the presbytery to determine if a minister’s scruples were against an essential or non-essential article.

The ambiguity of the Adopting Act of 1729 on what constitutes an “essential tenet” has prompted calls for the church to provide a clear catalogue of essential tenets. The explication of what constitutes an essential tenet came to the forefront during the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy at the start of the twentieth century.²² In 1910, the General Assembly of the

²¹ “Adopting Act, 1729,” in *The Presbyterian Experience in the United States*, ed. William Yoo (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 13-4.

²² In this controversy, the Fundamentalist insisted on the timeless validity of Christian orthodoxy while the Modernists wanted to adapt the teachings of the church to account for the new advances in scientific knowledge. The Scopes Trial of 1925 brought this controversy into the secular sphere as William Jennings Bryant, a

Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. heard a complaint against the Presbytery of New York for ordaining candidates into ministry who allegedly refused to affirm the virgin birth of Jesus.²³ The conservative party was dominant at the 1910 General Assembly and “identified five essential tenets: the inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, Christ’s bodily resurrection, and his miracles.”²⁴ For many in the denomination, this list of essential tenets was seen as an attempt of the denomination to impose a biblical interpretation and system of theology against which they objected. This decision of the General Assembly is called the Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910. This deliverance was challenged in subsequent general assemblies but instead of being repealed, it was reaffirmed. The effect of the Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910 was to shift “the issue of confessional subscription away from the Westminster Standards themselves and toward a brief, shorthand list of doctrines.”²⁵

Opposition to the five-point Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910 culminated in the 1924 Auburn Affirmation which was signed by over 1,200 ministers in the denomination. The Auburn Affirmation clearly affirms their adherence to the Westminster Standards, but also points back to the Adopting Act of 1729 and the history of freedom of interpretation within the church. In response to the Auburn Affirmation, the 1925 General Assembly appointed a Special Commission to study the spiritual conditions of the church and the causes making for unrest. In its final report in 1927, the Special Commission found that the General Assembly did not have the authority to declare particular articles essential. Rather, it is up to the presbyteries to

Presbyterian elder and leader of the Fundamentalist side, oversaw the prosecution of John Scopes for teaching evolution in a public school in Dayton, Tennessee.

²³ The Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. is a predecessor denomination to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) which is the result of church unifications since 1910.

²⁴ Laird J. Stuart, “A Resource for Regathering God’s People,” in *Presbyterians Being Reformed: Reflections on What the Church Needs Today*, ed. Robert H. Bullock (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2006), 67.

²⁵ Small, “Essential Tenets?,” 228.

determine the fitness of a candidate. Small observes, “The authority of the General Assembly to set forth universal, binding designations of essential and necessary doctrines was denied.”²⁶

The resistance to cataloguing the church’s essential tenets is critical for the life of the church. According to former editor of *The Christian Century* and moderator of the 208th General Assembly John Buchanon, the “Reformed faith – the Reformed tradition – is not a list of theological propositions. It is a tradition, a living traditional at that, and a living tradition resists being pinned down too precisely, instead preserving its own energy and responsibility to respond to history, which is constantly changing.”²⁷ When the church catalogues the essential tenets it becomes stagnant and incapable of continuing the process of Reformation. This, however, does not mean that we should abandon the language of essential tenets in our ordination questions. “The Confessional Nature of the Church Report” declares: “Although some other wording may better express the intent, the phrase ‘essential tenets’ is intended to protect freedom with the limits of general commitment to the confessions.”²⁸ Essential tenets should be understood as the “great doctrines on which the church as a community agrees.”²⁹ These essential tenets emerge from the dialogue that takes place between those of us within the church and with our predecessors in the faith. The essential tenets are not to be imposed upon us and the confessions, but are at the heart of what the church believes and from which the ministry of the church originates.

²⁶ Ibid., 230.

²⁷ John Buchanon, “The Reformed Theological Tradition,” in *Presbyterians Being Reformed: Reflections on What the Church Needs Today*, ed. Robert H. Bullock (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2006), 46.

²⁸ “Confessional Nature of the Church Report,” xx.

²⁹ Jack Rogers, *Reading the Bible and the Confessions: The Presbyterian Way* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999), 100.

The Book of Confessions

While the Adopting Act of 1729 made the Westminster Standards the confessional standard of the church the General Assembly of the former United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA) expanded its confessional standard when it adopted the *Book of Confessions*, a collection of nine creeds and confessions, in 1967.³⁰ The UPCUSA had a plethora of options for which creeds and confessions to include in the new *Book of Confessions* due to the Reformed affinity for writing confessions. Historical theologian Jaroslav Pelikan notes: “it is particularly for the Reformed churches that any collection of confessions must be only a selection.”³¹ The inclusion of the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds was a simple decision as they were used in the worship of the church and are discussed in detail in many of the Reformation era confessions. The decision about which Protestant Reformation era confessions to include required significant debate because of the large number of available options.

³⁰ The nine creeds and confessions adopted were: The Nicene Creed, The Apostles’ Creed, The Scots Confession, The Heidelberg Catechism, The Second Helvetic Confession, The Westminster Confession of Faith, The Westminster Shorter Catechism, The Westminster Larger Catechism, The Theological Declaration of Barmen, and The Confession of 1967.

The contemporary Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is the result of two major church unions in the twentieth century. In 1958 the United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPCNA) and the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) merged to form the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA). In 1983 the UPCUSA merged with the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) to form the current denomination of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The Civil War brought about the formation of the PCUS in the south and the PCUSA in the north. The formation of the PC(USA) in 1983 was the reunification of these churches and the end of the longest Presbyterian schism in the United States to date. Unfortunately, the Presbyterian church continues to be marred by schisms in the United States. In 1936 the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) broke off from the PCUSA over the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. In 1973 the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) broke off from the PCUS in protest against the liberalism of the church and the ordination of women. In 1981 the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) broke off from the UPCUSA in protest to the liberalism of the church. In 2012 the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO) broke off from the PC(USA) over the issue of LGBTQIA+ marriage and ordination. For a more detailed history of the Presbyterian church, see James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1996). Also, the Presbyterian Historical Society has a helpful family tree of Presbyterian denominations at: <https://www.history.pcusa.org/history-online/presbyterian-history/family-tree-presbyterian-denominations>.

³¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 460.

The Protestant Reformation saw the development of national confessions in which leaders of the church in a particular nation would draw up a confession of their distinctive beliefs. Examples of this include the Augsburg Confession of 1530 (Lutheran Germany), the Scots Confession from 1560 (Scotland), the Belgic Confession in 1561 (Belgium and the Netherlands), the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 (Palatinate region of Germany), and the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1646 (England). After two centuries of confession writing, Protestant orthodoxy in the Reformed churches lost sight of the virtue of multiple confessions and became concerned with the rise of liberal theology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Wanting to prevent liberalism from having confessional standing, orthodox leaders led the opposition against the writing of new confessions. However, the twentieth century witnessed a revival of Reformed confessional writing.³²

The variety of creeds and confessions found in the *Book of Confessions* represent the theological reflections of Christians from different contexts who have preceded us in the faith.³³ The advantage of having only one doctrinal statement such as the Westminster Standards is that it provides a single, unified view of what the church believes. But that advantage is also the disadvantage of having a single statement as the church has continued to speak throughout the years drawing on new insights and addressing fresh challenges. By having a variety of creeds and confessions in the *Book of Confessions* the PC(USA) draws on the diversity of the tradition but also faces the challenge of how to hold the various creeds and confessions together. These

³² “Confessional Nature of the Church Report,” xii.

³³ Historically, most Reformed churches around the world have believed that a plurality of confessions enriches the Reformed faith and practice (See: “Confessional Nature of the Church Report,” xv.). However, the OPC, PCA, and EPC continue to use the Westminster Standards as the sole theological standard for the denominations. ECO maintains the same confessions as the PC(USA) used at the time of its departure in 2012 so it does not include the Barmen Confession. The two largest denominations in the Dutch Reformed tradition in the United States, the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) use the Nicene Creed, the Apostles’ Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, and the Belhar Confession as their doctrinal standards.

creeds and confessions are bound together by coming from the same tradition and sharing the same foundational questions and beliefs, yet the different contexts and perspectives mean that they do not always align as neatly as leaders of the church sometimes present them. When the *Book of Confessions* was initially put adopted in 1967 the church made an intentional decision to live with and embrace the tension of having multiple creeds and confessions as the doctrinal standards of the church.

Having a *Book of Confessions* allows the PC(USA) to celebrate the diversity of ways in which God has spoken in and through the church over the centuries. Each creed and confession “was written in a particular time and place to express the eternal faith of the church in a specific context.”³⁴ Each creed and confession emphasizes distinct missional themes. “The *Book of Confessions* as a whole enriches our understanding of what it means to be Reformed Christians, helps us escape the provincialism to which we have been prone, and expresses our intention to join the worldwide family of Reformed churches that is far bigger and more inclusive than our particular denomination.”³⁵ In its creeds and confessions, the PC(USA) binds itself to the faith of the church universal, to the faith of the Protestant Reformation, and to the faith of the Reformed tradition. Through these documents we recognize our place within the larger church, across time and space. This collection of creeds and confessions in the *Book of Confessions* “allows us to learn from particular insights of specific church communities as they faced unique historical and cultural challenges.”³⁶

³⁴ Clifton Kirkpatrick, “Preface,” in *Conversations with the Confessions: Dialogue in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Joseph D. Small (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2005), ix.

³⁵ “Confessional Nature of the Church Report,” xvi.

³⁶ Sheldon W. Sorge, “Why the Church?,” in *Conversations with the Confessions: Dialogue in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Joseph D. Small (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2005), 154-5.

As each creed and confession was written in its own unique context, it is also limited in its perspective by that context. According to Rogers, “the writers of the Confessions were persons of their own culture and took for granted many applications of the Christian faith that we would not consider biblical or valid for us. We cannot, therefore, literally and uncritically cite attitudes or actions recommended in the Confessions without taking into account the assumptions of their sixteenth- or seventeenth-century culture.”³⁷ Each creed and confession addresses the issues of its historical situation; from the opportunities to the challenges. As such, they speak to their context, using the language and assumptions of that context. The writers of all creeds and confessions are influenced by the sexual, racial, and economic biases of their time and location, and are limited to the scientific understandings of their day.³⁸ According to South African Reformed theologian and one of the authors of the Belhar Confession Dirkie Smit, “While most Reformed believers fully understand and acknowledge that we need responsible hermeneutics when reading Scripture, for some remarkable reason many do not fully agree and appreciate that we similarly need responsible hermeneutics when reading the documents from our confessional tradition.”³⁹ Studying the historical context of the creeds and confessions is not undertaken in order to discredit them, but to more fully understand them and their limits.

In recognizing the ways in which the perspective of the creeds and confessions are limited, we are better able to discern the ways in which they may be improved. In his essay, “The Desirability and Possibility of a Universal Reformed Creed” presented at the World Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1925, Karl Barth powerfully and concisely states: “From

³⁷ Rogers, *Reading the Bible and the Confessions*, 62.

³⁸ As the PC(USA) writes a new inclusive and missional confession it too will be influenced by these factors and biases.

³⁹ Dirk J. Smit, Foreword to *Neither Calendar Nor Clock: Perspectives on the Belhar Confession*, by Piet J. Naudé (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), x.

the beginning, the Reformed Church has treated its creeds as open to discussion and improvement, as liable to be superseded.”⁴⁰ Within the Reformed tradition it is recognized that the creeds and confessions of the church will need to be improved; no creed or confession is understood as infallible. The root of this recognition is found in the Reformed understanding of sin. In the doctrine of total depravity, the Reformed tradition recognizes that no aspect of human existence is unaffected by our estrangement from God and that even at our best, we are prone to sin and error.⁴¹ Therefore, the creeds and confessions of the Reformed tradition come with disclaimers built in. For example, the Scots Confession states: “we do not receive uncritically whatever has been declared to men under the name of the general councils, for it is plain that, being human, some of them have manifestly erred, and that in matters of great weight and importance.”⁴² With this statement, the authors of the Scots Confession acknowledge their own limitations and are inviting future Christians to correct and improve what they have written.

The creeds and confessions are in need of improvement not only because they are all prone to error, but also because history and culture do not stand still. What is said here today is not always appropriate or relevant in another time or place. According to historical theologian Brian Gerrish, “confession is a never-ending task because the situation of the believing community changes and gives rise to new demands and new insights.”⁴³ A prime example of this within the PC(USA) is the ordination of women. The Scots Confession and the Second Helvetic Confession both explicitly bar women from holding ecclesial office but in the twentieth century the church discerned that it was not only appropriate but a gift for women to serve as ministers,

⁴⁰ Karl Barth, “The Desirability and Possibility of a Universal Reformed Creed,” in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920-1928*, trans. Louis Pettibone Smith (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015), 115.

⁴¹ Case-Winters, “*Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda*: Reformed and Always to Be Reformed,” xxxi.

⁴² “The Scots Confession,” in *The Book of Confessions*, 3.20, 20-1.

⁴³ Brian A. Gerrish, *Saving and Secular Faith: An Invitation to Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 65.

elders, and deacons. This discernment arose out of the Reformed affirmation of the priesthood of all believers and the confessional status for the ordination of women came in the Brief Statement of Faith. Likewise, marriage has been defined as between a man and a woman in the Second Helvetic Confession, the Westminster Standards, and the Confession of 1967 but in 2011 and 2015 the PC(USA) changed its polity to affirm the ordination of those within the LGBTQIA+ community and to eliminate this definition of marriage. Here, like with the ordination of women in the twentieth century, changes to church polity have preceded changes in church doctrine. The issues of the ordination of women and members of the LGBTQIA+ community demonstrate how the creeds and confessions can lose their ability to speak to the contemporary context necessitating the writing of new creeds and confessions.

The creeds and confessions of the PC(USA) are part of a living tradition. This tradition, like the world and culture in which it lives, is not static. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, the creeds and confessions continue to speak to us today. And through the calling of the Holy Spirit, we are called at certain points in history to add to the confessional richness of the church.

The Role of Creeds and Confessions in the PC(USA)

Within the *Book of Confessions* there are creeds, confessions, catechisms, a theological declaration, and a statement of faith. These different titles express the different forms and styles of the documents in addition to the preferred language at the time of their writings. There is not a hierarchy within the *Book of Confessions* in which certain types are elevated above others.⁴⁴

The two most common terms used for the documents of the *Book of Confessions* are “creeds” and “confessions.” The term “creed” comes from the Latin word *credo* which means “I

⁴⁴ In instances of a conflict between the documents of the *Book of Confessions*, it is the responsibility of the presbytery, synod, or General Assembly to determine precedence.

believe.” The creeds are therefore an acknowledgement of our personal faith and trust in God. When stated in worship or other public setting, it is our declaration of faith to the church and the world. But the creed is also a public declaration of what the community of faith believes. In reciting the creeds in worship, we pass on our beliefs to future generations and publicly proclaim our faith to the world. As John Leith, one of the leading Presbyterian historical theologians of the 20th century, helpfully observes: “creeds are first of all an expression of the life of the Christian community.”⁴⁵

The term “confession” can be confusing in the church because it is different from our common usage of the term. According to Rogers, “In ordinary English, ‘confession’ means an admission that you have done something wrong. To confess in the theological sense, however, means to affirm, declare, or take a stand for what you believe to be true – for what you have done right!”⁴⁶ When the church confesses, it is declaring to the world, both those within and outside the church, what it believes.

However, the creeds and confessions do more than articulate the beliefs of individuals and the church. According to the *Book of Order*:

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) states its faith and bears witness to God’s grace in Jesus Christ in the creeds and confessions in the Book of Confessions. In these statements the church declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do. These statements identify the church as a community of people known by its convictions as well as by its actions. They guide the church in its study and interpretation of the Scriptures; they summarize the essence of Reformed Christian tradition; they direct the church in maintaining sound doctrines; they equip the church for its work of proclamation. They serve to strengthen personal commitment and the life and witness of the community of believers.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ John H. Leith, “A Brief History of the Creedal Task: The Role of Creeds in Reformed Churches,” in *To Confess the Faith Today*, ed. Jack L. Stotts and Jane Dempsey Douglas (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 36.

⁴⁶ Rogers, *Reading the Bible and the Confessions*, 53.

⁴⁷ *The Book of Order*, F-2.01, 9.

The role of the creeds and confessions of the PC(USA) is to articulate the church's identity, guide the church in its interpretation of Scripture, summarize and defend the doctrine of the church, equip the church, particularly its ministers, for the proclamation of the gospel, and strengthen the life and witness of the church. Let us look at these roles in order.

First, the creeds and confessions teach us who we are as a church. They teach us our identity as the people of God. According to leading black Reformed theologian Willie Jennings, "This is not an easy task because most people seem quite sure who they are. Yet the goal of *The Book of Confessions* is not to destroy our confident self-knowledge, but to guide it to maturity."⁴⁸ The creeds and confessions rehearse the saving events which are the foundation of the church and the memory of which sustains the church's identity. The threat which this identity forming attempts to overcome is disintegration, the loss of the church's center which results in forgetting why the church has been called into being. The creeds and confessions therefore continually draw the church back to its source in Jesus Christ. But the identity of the church is not maintained simply through belief but through action as well. The creeds and confessions "shape the church's faithfulness and courage in its mission."⁴⁹ It is through being the church, through the actions of the church to proclaim the good news of the gospel, to work for justice and peace, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and tend to the sick that the church lives into its identity. The creeds and confessions spur the church on in these and other missions helping it live into its identity as the church.

⁴⁸ Willie J. Jennings, "Who Are We?," in *Conversations with the Confessions: Dialogue in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Joseph D. Small (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2005), 111.

⁴⁹ "The Assessment of Proposed Amendments to the *Book of Confessions*," in *The Book of Confessions: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part I* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2016), xxix.

Second, the task of the confessions is to interpret Scripture. The creeds and confessions serve “as a guide for the interpretation of and for reflection upon the meaning of faith. The creeds distinguished what was centrally important in scripture together in a coherent fashion. The creeds are the record the churches’ interpretation of the scripture in the authoritative guide to its interpretation in the present.”⁵⁰ The challenge comes when the creeds and confessions within the *Book of Confessions* are no longer seen as offering the most faithful interpretation of Scripture. Gerrish gets at this point when he writes: “Confessions have unquestionably functioned in the Reformed church as the hermeneutic lens through which Scripture is read, but only as long as the church is persuaded that they interpret the Scriptural norm correctly.”⁵¹ When the creeds and confessions no longer provide an interpretation Scripture accepted by the church, it is necessary for the church to provide a new interpretation through a new creed or confession. We saw this above in the example of the ordination of women and the correction to interpretation offered in The Brief Statement of Faith. The interpretations in the *Book of Confessions* about what it means to be human and the nature of the church do not adequately reflect the contemporary interpretations of the church. A new confession with an inclusive anthropology and missional ecclesiology is needed.

Third, the creeds and confessions summarize and defend the doctrine of the church. According to the “Confessional Nature of the Church Report,” “Most confessions have been intended as polemical defense of true Christian faith and life against perversion from within as well as from attacks from outside the church. They are the church’s means of preserving the authenticity and purity of its faith.”⁵² The church proclaims what it believes, and what it rejects,

⁵⁰ Leith, 38.

⁵¹ Gerrish, 61.

⁵² “Confessional Nature of the Church Report,” viii.

in its creeds and confessions. While some of the documents in the *Book of Confessions* such as the Scots Confession, the Theological Declaration of Barmen, and the Belhar Confession are explicit in the teachings they are rejecting, others such as the Confession of 1967 and the Brief Statement of Faith take a subtler approach and offer implicit critiques of what the church is rejecting.

Fourth, the creeds and confessions equip the church to proclaim the gospel. Here we see the Reformed emphasis on the preaching of the Word as a mark of the church.⁵³ It is important to note that the creeds and confessions are not what is preached, but Jesus Christ as revealed through the biblical witness. “Nevertheless, preachers may, and should also be ‘instructed,’ ‘led,’ and ‘continually guided’ by the confessions as they choose and interpret their biblical texts and prepare their sermons.”⁵⁴ This calls us back to the second role of creeds and confessions in interpreting Scripture; the preacher is to be guided by the interpretation of the creeds and confessions in her or his proclamation to the church.

Finally, the creeds and confessions of the church guide the church and leaders. When ministers, elders, and deacons are ordained and installed they agree to be guided by the creeds and confessions. But “it is not only individual ordained persons but also general assemblies, presbyteries, and synods that are to be instructed, led, and continually guided by the church’s confessions.”⁵⁵ How the church operates at every level should reflect the teachings found in the *Book of Confessions*. This means not only our preaching and education, but also our ministries and mission should be guided by the *Book of Confessions*. Also, how we hire and pay staff, how

⁵³ According to the *Book of Order*, “Since the earliest days of the Reformation, Reformed Christians have marked the presence of the true Church wherever: the Word of God is truly heard, the Sacraments are rightly administered, and ecclesiastical discipline is uprightly ministered.” *Book of Order*, F-1.0303, 4.

⁵⁴ “Confessional Nature of the Church Report,” xxiii.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, xxii.

we invest our funds, and how we conduct our business meetings should reflect the theology and ethics of our creeds and confessions. When the practices do not adhere to the *Book of Confessions* we are charged to alter our practices and to discern the adequacy of our current creeds and confessions.

Adding to the Book of Confessions

In every time and place the church is called to articulate what it believes and the implications of those beliefs for the church and world. It is called to bear a *present* witness to God's grace and love in Jesus Christ. According to leading 20th century Reformed theologian in the Presbyterian church Shirley Guthrie, Reformed churches "have continually asked in every new time and place what the living God we come to know in scripture is saying and doing *here* and *now*, and what we have to say and do if we are to be faithful and obedient Christians in *our* particular time and place – even if it means saying and doing things that may seem strange and shocking when compared with what Christians in other times and places have felt called to say and do."⁵⁶ The writing of a new creed or confession is not simply restating what has already been said in the previous creeds and confessions, but speaks in a new way to a new situation. "It has always been a hallmark of the Reformed tradition that it expects the Holy Spirit to guide churches in every place and every time, leading them confess anew what it means to confess the lordship of Christ in this time and this place."⁵⁷ The Reformed tradition is a living tradition, open and receptive to the call of the Holy Spirit as it navigates fresh challenges and opportunities. Part of our duty as the church is to articulate contemporary expressions of faith which speak to our context today; this is part of the mandate of proclamation given to the church.

⁵⁶ Guthrie, *Always Being Reformed*, 30.

⁵⁷ Ernst-Habib, 71.

In order to fulfill this mandate of articulating contemporary expressions of the faith, the PC(USA) has set forth in the *Book of Order* a clear process for amending the *Book of Confessions*. This process is described in the *Book of Order* as “deliberately demanding” because of the central place of the creeds and confessions in the identity of the church.⁵⁸ The first step in the process is for a motion to be made at General Assembly to study an amendment to the *Book of Confessions*.⁵⁹ If approved, this study would be conducted by a special committee of fifteen which would then report its findings, which would include any recommended revisions and a recommendation for or against inclusion in the *Book of Confessions*, to the next General Assembly. This General Assembly would then consider the report of the study committee and would need to vote on a proposal to amend the *Book of Confessions*. Should this vote be passed, the new confession would be sent to the presbyteries for consideration. Two-thirds of the presbyteries, 114 of the 170, would need to approve the amendment. Finally, if the new confession receives the necessary two-thirds support from the presbyteries, another General Assembly would need to vote to approve amending the *Book of Confessions*.⁶⁰ Only after all these steps are completed would a new confession be included within the PC(USA)’s *Book of Confessions*. This intentionally long and arduous process is designed to ensure broad support within the denomination before changes are made to the *Book of Confessions*.

⁵⁸ *The Book of Order*, F-2.02, 9.

⁵⁹ Here it is helpful for some basics of Presbyterian polity. According to the 2020 Statistical Report of the PC(USA), the denomination had 1.24 million members in 8,886 congregations. These congregations are grouped in 170 presbyteries which are grouped into 16 synods. Each congregation is governed by the Session, the church board whose members are elected by the congregation and are ordained as ruling elders. The Session in turn elects commissioners to the presbytery. The membership of the presbytery is made up of these elected commissioners and the ministers within the geographical bounds of the presbytery. The presbytery elects commissioners (equal number of ruling elders and ministers) to the synod and to the General Assembly. The General Assembly of the PC(USA) meets every other year and considers business pertaining to the entire denomination. This business is referred to the General Assembly by two means: a recommendation from one of the committees of the General Assembly or via an overture from a presbytery of synod. If the overture comes from a presbytery, at least one other presbytery must concur for the General Assembly to take it under consideration.

⁶⁰ *The Book of Order*, G-6.03, 69-70.

What is not spelled out in the *Book of Order* is the process for writing a new creed or confession. The process above is designed to review a document for inclusion in the *Book of Confessions*, not necessarily to write that document. Thankfully, the PC(USA) can draw on the precedent set by the writing of the Confession of 1967 and the Brief Statement of Faith when the General Assemblies voted to form committees charged with writing a new document to be considered for inclusion in the *Book of Confessions*. If the 225th General Assembly (2022) discerns that the church is called to write a new confession, it would create a special committee for this task. The writing of a new confession would be a monumental task and responsibility as the document would shape and guide the church into the future.

Still Reforming

The reform of the church is an ongoing process as the church discerns its identity, mission, and how to speak to the world in its present context. The writing of new creeds and confessions plays a central role in the ongoing reform of the church. The creeds and confessions found in the Book of Confessions are public declarations of what the church believes and does. They form the identity of the church and shape its actions. In their use in worship the creeds and confessions remind us of our Presbyterian identity and teach the beliefs of the church to newcomers and future generations. The essential tenets of the creeds and confessions unite the church in its core theological beliefs while also allowing individual freedom to interpret Scripture and theology in areas not deemed essential.

Built within the PC(USA) doctrinal standards and polity is the assumption that new creeds and confessions will be needed. To write new confessions is part of who we are as Presbyterians. The writing of new creeds and confessions does not necessitate the elimination or relegation of our current doctrinal statements but adding our voice to the witness of the church

throughout the ages.⁶¹ The challenge is in discerning when the church is called to write a new creed or confession and then writing it in a way that faithfully interprets Scripture and addresses contemporary issues facing the church. Thankfully, the PC(USA) has four examples from the twentieth century of times when the church navigated this process which can assist us in our current process of discernment. Let us now turn our attention to those four twentieth century examples.

⁶¹ While the *Book of Order* provides a detailed process for how to add to the *Book of Confessions*, there is no mechanism within Presbyterian polity for subtraction.

Chapter 2: Learning from the 20th Century Confessions

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has four documents in its *Book of Confessions* from the twentieth century: The Theological Declaration of Barmen, The Confession of 1967, The Belhar Confession, and A Brief Statement of Faith – Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). As the church today embarks on the process of discernment regarding the writing of a new confession, it can learn from the process that led to the writing of these four documents. The focus here is not on the *content* of these documents, but on the *context* in which they were written. What was going on in the world around the church? What were the debates taking place within the church? What was the purpose the church had in mind when it wrote these documents? In short, what led the church to write a new confessional statement? The twentieth Century confessions were written to address false teachings of the church and to build the identity and purpose of the church. In each of the confessions the church builds upon the Reformed tradition to speak to its context. The writing of a new inclusive and missional confession would build on these previous confessions as the church seeks to speak in its current context.

The Theological Declaration of Barmen

The Theological Declaration of Barmen was the Confessing Church's response to the Nazification of the German church in the 1930s. Through the Theological Declaration of Barmen, the church rejects the idolatry of totalitarian regimes which elevate a leader above God. It also rejects the attempt to subordinate the church to the state, making the church an instrument of political propaganda instead of the body of Christ called to speak prophetically to the world.

The origins of The Theological Declaration of Barmen go back to the devastation experienced by Germany in World War One and its aftermath. Germany was a young nation,

having been unified under the Hohenzollern empire of Prussia in the 1870s. At the start of the 1900s European nations were tensed for war; a series of military alliances saw the continent divided into two sides. All that was needed to start a war was a spark and that spark was provided by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo. Germany was ultimately on the losing side of the war and the Treaty of Versailles which ended the war placed the blame for the war on Germany. Germany was forced to pay staggering reparations and the Hohenzollern monarchy was replaced with the Weimar Republic, a weak and fragile democratic government. Within Germany, the belief that the Germans had been betrayed by their government and Jews quickly spread and became widely accepted. Adolf Hitler, full of pride for his race and sensing the dissatisfaction of the German people, founded the National Socialist Party in 1919 with “a mission to regenerate the German people and save them from Marxists, Jews, Capitalists, Democrats, and Freemasons.”⁶² Hitler spoke to the German people’s wounded pride when he envisioned Germany reclaiming its place in the world as a great military power. In order to achieve that vision, Hitler believed it was necessary for there to be a purification of the German/Aryan race, an elimination of class distinctions, the removal of divisive elements in society such as political parties and religious denominations, and for there to be a new educational system which reflected the values of “true” and “loyal” Germans.

By January of 1933 the Nazi party had won enough seats in the Reichstag, the German parliament, for Hitler to be appointed as chancellor of the Weimar Republic. When President Paul von Hindenberg died on August 2, 1934, Hitler “abolished the presidency and proclaimed himself *Reichführer* (National Leader) as well as Chancellor. All military and governmental officials were compelled to take an unconditional oath of personal allegiance to Hitler.”⁶³ In the

⁶² Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds*, 177.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 184.

months after Hitler was appointed chancellor in 1933, the Nazi regime embarked on an aggressive campaign of “incorporation.” “Everything from labor unions and professional associations to youth groups and sports teams were made official organizations of the party and the state. This included the Lutheran, Reformed, and United Protestant churches, which were being consolidated into a single Reich church under the leadership of the Faith Movement of German Christians.”⁶⁴ Through these efforts, Hitler and the Nazis were attempting to unite political identity with national identity so that to be a German was also to be a Nazi.

The German Christians movement was started by the Nazi party in response to the challenge the church posed to Nazi ideology. The church, with its great influence over the German population, were not beholden to the Nazi ideology. Therefore, Hitler and the Nazis cultivated allies within the church who would perpetuate Nazi thought. The Nazi party platform “assumed the position of ‘positive Christianity’ without any confessional ties, extending freedom of confession only to those confessions which did not offend the ethical and moral sensibilities of the German race.”⁶⁵ At their first national convention in Berlin on April 3-5, 1933, the German Christians declared:

God has created me a German. Germanism is a gift of God. God wants me to fight for my Germany. Military service is in no sense a violation of Christian conscience, but is obedience to God. The believer possesses the right of revolution against a State that furthers the powers of darkness. He also has this right in the face of a Church board that does not unreservedly acknowledge the exaltation of the nation. For a German the church is the fellowship of believers who are obligated to fight for a Christian Germany. The goal of the ‘Faith Movement of “German Christians”’ is an evangelical German Reich Church.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Derek A. Woodard-Lehman, “Democratic Faith: Barth, Barmen, and the Politics Of Reformed Confession,” in *The Legacy of the Barmen Declaration: Politics and the Kingdom*, ed. Fred Dallmayr (New York: Lexington Books, 2019), 55.

⁶⁵ Rothney Stok Tshaka, “The Significance of Karl Barth’s Theology for the Belhar Confession: An Analysis of Theology of German Origin in South Africa during the Apartheid Epoch,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 41, no. 1 (2015): 188.

⁶⁶ Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds*, 182.

For the German Christians, the emphasis was on the German over the Christian identity. In 1933 the term “National Mission” emerged from the rhetoric of the German Christian movement. The root of this “National Mission” was not the gospel but “openly and avowedly German nationhood.”⁶⁷ Thus, according to the German Christians the primary work of the church was to further German nationhood, particularly in the form of support of the Nazi party and regime. German systematic theologian Wolf Krötke observes, “Acknowledging Adolf Hitler as God’s revelation in German history now became a requirement for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.”⁶⁸

The subordination of Jesus Christ and the gospel to Hitler and the Nazi ideology gained confessional status amongst German Christians in 1933. In 1934 the church historian Kurt Dietrich Schmidt published *The Confessions of 1933*, a collection of seventy-five creedal statements written during the first year of the Nazi regime. According to Eberhard Busch, a German Reformed theologian and former student of and personal assistant to Karl Barth, “In them, the confession of faith in the triune God was rather glibly connected, even mixed in, with the confessional commitment to the German people and its special history, to its authoritarian form of state, its Führer, and its German race.”⁶⁹ The Nazi rhetoric of Germany as the divinely chosen and preferred nation of God is echoed in these confessions.

The German nationalism of the German Christians also included the anti-Semitism which shaped Nazi ideology and was increasingly embraced throughout Germany. German Reformed theologian Margit Ernst-Habib observes, “The so-called German Christians introduced to the

⁶⁷ Eberhard Busch, *The Barmen Theses Then and Now*, trans Darrell and Judith Guder, with a foreword by Daniel L. Migliore (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 90.

⁶⁸ Wolf Krötke, “Historical Overview of the Barmen Theological Declaration of 1934,” in *The Legacy of the Barmen Declaration: Politics and the Kingdom*, ed. Fred Dallmayr (New York: Lexington Books, 2019), 40.

⁶⁹ Busch, 2.

church a crude mixture of pagan and pseudo-Christian elements, trying to prove that the Aryan race was superior, created by God to rule the world. They rejected everything ‘Jewish’—whether it was the Old Testament, huge parts of Paul’s theology, or Christian pastors with Jewish ancestors.”⁷⁰ The German Christians went so far as to apply the Aryan paragraph which prevented anyone with Jewish ancestry from serving in the government to the church. This decision excluded a number of ministers from serving in the church and made race the decisive criterion for church membership. Here again the goal of the Nazis and German Christians was “purification.” They sought to remove Jewish distortions of the faith but ended up distorting the message of the gospel in the process.⁷¹

The rise of the German Christians did not go unchallenged within the church. In 1933 the Pastors’ Emergency League was formed in opposition to the distortion of the Christian message perpetuated by the German Christians. In response to this opposition, Reich Bishop Ludwig Müller published the “muzzling edict” on January 4, 1934, which ironically declared worship services were not to be used for “political agitation” but exclusively for worship.⁷² This edict was designed suppress opposition to Nazi influence in the church. To add to the irony, the edict was published the same day that the First Free Reformed Synod met in Barmen-Gemarke. This synod, made up of Reformed churches who rejected the Nazification of the church, endorsed the “Declaration Concerning the Right Understanding of the Reformed Confessions of Faith in the German Evangelical Church of the Present” as the first anti-Nazi confession adopted by a church body. While the Synod attempted to speak on behalf of the whole church, it was still a Reformed Synod. A more ecumenical synod was under discussion by the leaders of the Pastors’ Emergency

⁷⁰ Ernst-Habib74-5.

⁷¹ Busch, 24-5.

⁷² Dirk J. Smit, “Social Transformation and Confessing the Faith? Karl Barth’s Views on Confession Revisited,” *Scriptura* 72 (2000): 76.

League and planned for late May of 1934. A committee appointed to handle the theological preparation for the synod was composed of Hans Asmussen, Thomas Briet, and Karl Barth. Asmussen, Briet, and Barth met prior to the synod to put together an outline for a new confession, building on the work of the Reformed Synod. “On May 29-31, 1934, representatives from eighteen German provincial churches – Lutheran, Reformed, and United (Lutheran and Reformed) – met in the industrial city of Barmen-Wuppertal as the First Confessing Synod of the German Evangelical Church.”⁷³ During an afternoon break on the 29th, Barth fleshed out the outline worked out previously with Asmussen and Briet. Afterwards, Asmussen wrote an additional commentary. According to Reformed theologian and moderator of the 213th General Assembly Jack Rogers:

On the morning of May 30, 1934, the Barmen Declaration was passed out to the delegates. Asmussen addressed the gathering in support of the document. An expanded theological commission composed of eight members, chaired by Breit, was appointed. They edited and revised the Declaration to the satisfaction of the synod. On May 31, the synod unanimously adopted the Declaration. The delegates responded by singing the last stanza of ‘Now Thank We All Our God.’⁷⁴

Participation in the First Confessing Synod was a serious risk for the delegates. Their rejection of Nazism could cost them their positions and even their freedom. However, the delegates at Barmen refused to be intimidated as they boldly and publicly articulated the gospel amidst the Nazi threat to Christianity.

Of central importance in the Theological Declaration of Barmen was the repudiation and rejection of the idolatry of German Christians, particularly in their false understanding of the state. In its rejection of idolatry, the Theological Declaration of Barmen is characteristically Reformed. From John Calvin onward, the Reformed tradition has placed a special emphasis on

⁷³ Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds*, 175.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 190.

the dangers of idolatry. According to Rogers, “An idol is any humanly created thing to which people give their ultimate allegiance. Idolatry is giving our total commitment to something in the creation rather than to the Creator alone.”⁷⁵ Barth and the Confessing Church recognized that Nazi and the German Christians were placing their commitment to the German nation and race above their faith in God. This idolatry of the German Christians culminated in the revival of the Caesar-worship rejected by early Christianity. According to Reformed feminist theologian Cynthia Rigby, “In the face of Hitler’s self-proclaimed messianism, the Theological Declaration of Barmen insists that what God has to do with us cannot be discerned by way of any lord other than Jesus Christ himself.”⁷⁶ The Theological Declaration of Barmen seeks to expose the idolatry that hides within Christianity and the church.

In its fifth and sixth articles, The Theological Declaration of Barmen addresses the issue of the relationship between church and state. For Barmen, this issue was an extension of the heresy of idolatry of the German Christians. Theologians Friedrich Gogarten and Emanuel Hirsch supported the Nazi regime by arguing the totalitarian Nazi state was the authentic state rather than the democratic Weimar Republic and that the church was called to conform its message to the Nazi regime.⁷⁷ They twisted Martin Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms to make the church an instrument of the Nazi state. Busch responds to this distortion when he writes: “The *proper* sense of that doctrine is its emphasis that *God* rules the church, so that the church must allow itself to be ruled by God rather than man in every dimension, including its relationship to the state, thus obeying God rather than man in accordance with Acts 5:29.”⁷⁸ For

⁷⁵ Ibid., 191.

⁷⁶ Cynthia L. Rigby, “What Does God Have to Do with Us?,” in *Conversations with the Confessions: Dialogue in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Joseph D. Small (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2005), 122.

⁷⁷ Busch, 73-8.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 84.

the Confessing Church, the church was not a subordinate entity to the state. Likewise, the state was not to be a subordinate entity of the church. In both cases the boundary between church and state is dissolved so that neither functions as God intended. Rather, they saw that the proper relationship between church and state was only possible when the lordship of God over our entire lives is recognized.

The Confessing Church articulated its resistance to Nazi and German Christian idolatry and totalitarianism in the Theological Declaration of Barmen. It rejects the “false doctrines” perpetuated not only by the Nazi party in the world, but particularly spread by the German Christians in the church. It “was addressed by German Protestants – Lutheran, Reformed, and United – all of whom stood in one or another confessional tradition and who were therefore accustomed to the use of a creedal statement to combat heresy, even though for some of them the historic confessions had lost some of their authority.”⁷⁹ The Confessing Church used the language of the Reformed and Lutheran traditions to confront the destructive influences of Hitler, the Nazi party, and the German Christians on the church. The Theological Declaration of Barmen spells out for Christians living in Germany the threat posed to their Christian faith by these malignant forces.

While the Confessing Church was unique amongst German institutions for speaking out against the Nazis – universities, the military, trade unions, the legal profession, the arts, and businesses were all silent – The Theological Declaration of Barmen was a limited document. Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw in the Aryan paragraph a *status confessionis*, a case for confession, yet Barmen is silent on it. While acknowledging its importance and influence, feminist theologian and Dean of the Disciples Divinity House at the University of Chicago Divinity School Kristine

⁷⁹ Pelikan, 512.

Culp reminds us that The Theological Declaration of Barmen is far from a perfect confession.

She writes:

for all its power to orient courageous protest, the Barmen Declaration had serious shortcomings. Its protest remained church-centered, focused on the constriction of the church and Christian conscience. It evaded explicit condemnation of Hitler and Nazi totalitarianism and, as Bonhoeffer and later Barth acknowledged, it did not even approach the so-called Jewish question. It failed to protest the most heinous aspect of the Nazi regime: its propagation of virulent hatred of Jews and other ‘outsiders,’ a propagation that would escalate, horrifically and relentlessly, in a few short years into a massive, systemic program of extermination.⁸⁰

Barth, like others from the Confessing Church who survived World War II, regretted that the church did not do more to resist the evils of Nazism.⁸¹

Like the people who wrote and endorsed it, The Theological Declaration of Barmen is flawed. Yet it powerfully demonstrates the commitment of the church in confronting idolatry within the church and society. It shows that political domination and exploitation are not just political and social issues, but theological and ethical concerns as well. At the Barmen Synod the Confessing Church worked to clarify the faith of the church in face of contemporary challenges in the church and society. It reminds us that the threat of idolatry has morphed through the ages but it has not disappeared. And it reminds us that the commitment to the gospel may mean taking an unpopular stance or resisting against those in authority over us.

The Confession of 1967

In 1929 American Presbyterians celebrated two centuries of the Westminster Standards as the doctrinal standard of the church going back to the Adopting Act of 1729. Two hundred years of using a single set of documents to guide the church’s theology and practices. While the

⁸⁰ Kristine Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 143.

⁸¹ Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds*, 191.

Westminster Standards had seen a few amendments in the American church, it remained largely unchanged, even as the world around the church had changed radically. Following the Enlightenment and the American Revolution, those within the church had grown tired of the doctrinal disputes which characterized the Protestant Reformation. Instead, the focus of the church turned to evangelism and mission as the church strove to make the world more like the Kingdom of God. Doctrinal divisions were not eliminated, but American churches worked together on a shared vision of the world.

This shared vision was shattered with the Civil War as issues of states' rights and slavery divided not only the nation but also congregations and denominations. In the aftermath of the Civil War the church grew increasingly divided over the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. This controversy resulted in many Protestant denominations splitting by the 1930s. With the 1930s came the Great Depression followed by World War II, the Holocaust, and the development and use of nuclear weapons. Tired of the theological conflicts within the church and the urgent crises in world events, many Americans "wished to forget about theology, have peace, and get on with the practical work of the church."⁸² Once again doctrinal difference lost their significance as Christians faced a perceived growing threat of secularism.

The church following World War II was radically different from the church which embraced the Adopting Act in 1729. But it was not just the world which was changing, the theology of the church had changed as well. During the 1930s and 1940s American Presbyterians were increasingly under the theological influence of Karl Barth and neo-orthodoxy. Barth offered a new way of approaching Scripture, not as a collection of inerrant facts, but as the human record of a real encounter with God. "By the late 1950s, neo-orthodoxy was well

⁸² Ibid., 208.

established as the working theological consensus in the Presbyterian Church. Barth and, through him, Calvin, rather than the propositions of the Westminster Confession, were the theological guides of Presbyterian theologians.”⁸³ The turn to Barth highlighted a key problem for Presbyterians: the archaic language of the Westminster Standards. Written three hundred years earlier in England, the Westminster Standards no longer spoke to the contemporary American experience. In 1956 the Presbytery of Amarillo sent an overture to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. asking that the Shorter Catechism be rewritten in contemporary language.⁸⁴ A special committee was formed to investigate this option and returned to the General Assembly in 1957 with two alternatives: either prepare a historical introduction to the catechism and update the scripture references or form a committee to write a new doctrinal statement. It was the recommendation of this special committee that a new doctrinal statement be pursued.⁸⁵

While discussions about the needs for either a revision of the Westminster Standards or a new doctrinal statement were taking place, American Presbyterians were also discussing denominational unification. According to church historian James Smylie:

Beginning in the early 1950s, the PCUSA, the PCUS, and the UPCNA laid plans for a Presbyterian union. Conversations about such a union been carried on intermittently since the Civil War. They were resumed in the spirit of the times. In 1954, a vote was taken on a union plan. The PCUSA and the UPCNA approved it, but the PCUS voted it down at the presbytery level. It failed to receive the required, but difficult, three-fourths vote.⁸⁶

⁸³ Ibid., 209.

⁸⁴ This was not the first time this was suggested. In 1925, the church adopted the *Confessional Statement*, an attempt to modernize the language of the *Westminster Confession* which was falling into disuse, “declaring that the Westminster Standards of the 1640s should not be the last word uttered by Presbyterians about God and human nature and destiny.” (Smylie, 114.)

⁸⁵ Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds*, 209-10.

⁸⁶ Smylie, 124.

On May 28, 1958 the General Assemblies of the PCUSA and the UPCNA met in Pittsburgh and merged to form the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (UPCUSA). The uniting General Assembly, following the advice of the special committee report a year earlier, appointed the Special Committee on a Brief Contemporary Statement of Faith, chaired by Edward A. Dowey, Jr., a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Dowey and the Special Committee quickly realized the limitations of the mandate set before them by the General Assembly which had tasked them with writing a brief contemporary statement of faith. The first issue was how to understand the place of a new confession within the church when the church had just one doctrinal standard: the Westminster Standards. The Special Committee appealed to the General Assembly to broaden its mandate to include a fuller recognition of the confessional history of the church. The argument of the Special Committee, which was accepted by the General Assembly, was that the Westminster Standards represent the thought and belief of the church in a particular context but does not exhaust the breadth and depth of the Reformed faith.⁸⁷ The witness of other confessional documents, not just the new Confession of 1967, was proposed in the *Book of Confessions*.

The adoption of the *Book of Confessions* faced two significant stumbling blocks. First, the Special Committee had omitted the Westminster Larger Catechism in its initial proposal for the *Book of Confessions*. This omission was justified by the Special Committee on the basis that it was seldom used. This omission was met with immediate objections as presbyteries questioned the constitutionality of removing a confessional standard. Presbyterian polity did not, and still

⁸⁷ In his appearance on the CBS show “Lamp unto my Feet” hosted by George Crothers, Dowey makes this point repeatedly. He observes that the Westminster Standards are from a particular time and place in the history of the church, with the Reformed tradition also having a multitude of other confessional statements. George Crothers, “A New Confession.” Broadcast. *Lamp unto My Feet*. (New York: CBS Television, 1966).

does not, provide for removing documents, only “amending” or “altering.”⁸⁸ Not wanting to threaten the entire project of the new confession and the proposed *Book of Confessions*, the Special Committee revised its recommendation to the General Assembly to include the Larger Catechism.

The second issue around the *Book of Confessions* was the issue of priority. For example, during the 1966 General Assembly, the Rev. A. Culver Gordon asked “If these documents are on a parity, does the fuller treatment of scripture of the Westminster Confession gain control of the lesser treatment in the proposed Confession of Nineteen Sixty-Seven?”⁸⁹ For Gordon and others, the pressing question was how to understand the relationship between the documents of the *Book of Confessions*. Would the Confession of 1967 have authority over the Westminster Standards because it is newer, or would the Westminster Standards take precedence because of its more extensive treatment of Scripture? Dr. Leonard J. Trinterud of the Special Committee answered this question at the General Assembly by comparing the documents of the *Book of Confessions* to the various books of the Bible.⁹⁰ Dr. William Skinner of the Committee of Fifteen followed this up by stating:

We do not think that the Confession of Sixty-Seven is dethroning the other documents or replacing them. I've seen that question recently, any more than the Gospel of John dethrones the Psalms. We believe that these documents belong in the history of the church. This is the tradition in which we stand. Sixty-seven happens to be the latest expression of our faith for the day in which we are living. All of them are expressions of the Reformed tradition out of which we come.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds*, 204.

⁸⁹ “Confession of 1967. Side B,” Pearl Digital Collections (Presbyterian Historical Society), accessed May 6, 2021, https://digital.history.pcusa.org/islandora/object/islandora%3A116354?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=0f8299d8330e63a4cda&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=4.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ “Confession of 1967. Side C,” Pearl Digital Collections (Presbyterian Historical Society), accessed May 6, 2021, https://digital.history.pcusa.org/islandora/object/islandora%3A116360?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=0f8299d8330e63a4cda&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=1. The Committee of Fifteen was the committee tasked with reviewing and revising the Confession of 1967 after the Special Committee had completed its task of drafting the new confessional statement.

Where there are areas of disagreement between the documents of the *Book of Confessions*, it is the role of the church to adjudicate those disagreements. There is not an established hierarchy of authority within the *Book of Confessions*, but the recognition that they are all faithful articulations of the church written by flawed people. By including a group of documents for the doctrinal standards of the church, the church received the witness of the Reformed faith through history and from different geographic locations.

In addition to the issue of recognizing the confessional history of the church, the Special Committee sought and was granted a wider mandate on their task of writing a new statement. Initially, the Special Committee had the mandate of writing a short statement of faith which would serve as a pointer to what the church believed. However, with the expanded mandate the Special Committee was able to clearly articulate the meaning of Christ's reconciling work in the life of the church. With their mandate clarified, the Special Committee went about its work of crafting a new confessional statement for the church.

In May of 1965, the Special Committee presented its report, which included the newly written Confession of 1967 and the proposal for the *Book of Confessions*, to the General Assembly which accepted the report. The moderator of the General Assembly, William P. Thompson, called for a year of study and discussion and invited the entire denomination to offer their feedback and amendments.⁹² As required by Presbyterian polity, he also appointed a Committee of Fifteen to receive and consider proposed amendments.

During the process of study and revision, a group of conservative ministers and theologians formed Presbyterians United for Biblical Confessions, or PUBC, with the purpose of proposing revisions to the Confession of 1967 to make it "more biblical in content and

⁹² Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds*, 212-3.

evangelical in orientation.”⁹³ PUBC had no intention of being divisive within the church and was committed to working within the established process to revise the Confession of 1967. The PUBC sought revisions in five key areas: 1) a paragraph on the deity of Christ as significant as the proposed paragraph on his humanity; 2) a clear statement on the inspiration and authority of Scripture; 3) a statement on the necessity of the response of an individual to God’s grace in repentance; 4) a statement on the application of Jesus’ ethical teachings to contemporary concerns of divorce, drunkenness, and delinquency; and 5) the strengthening of the subscription questions in ordination vows of the church to give greater authority to the confessions of the church. The Committee of Fifteen incorporated the feedback of PUBC on the first four areas into the Confession of 1967 but decided against altering the ordination vows. The leadership of PUBC was satisfied with the revisions to the new confession and worked within the church to see its passage.

In addition to the PUBC the Presbyterian Lay Committee was founded in opposition to the Confession of 1967. The Lay Committee “was conceived in 1964 in part to oppose all corporate witness for social justice. This soon included opposition to the proposed Confession of 1967 and *Book of Confessions*.”⁹⁴ According to the Lay Committee, the silence of the Westminster Standards on issues of race, war, poverty, and other social concerns indicated that the church ought to be silent on them as well. Their opposition was not just expressed in the church, but through a concerted effort to discredit the Confession of 1967 in American society through advertisements in publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*.

⁹³ Ibid., 213.

⁹⁴ Eugene TeSelle, “C67 – Witness and Conflict,” *Church and Society* 92, no. 5 (May 2002): 43.

While the Lay Committee was critical of the Confession of 1967 for its breaking with the Reformed tradition in explicitly addressing contemporary social issues, for many others within the church this shift was an occasion for rejoicing as the Confession of 1967 provided the church with a clear theological vision for addressing the social issues which arose in the 1960s and 1970s. It describes the social ills of racial discrimination, the Cold War and the pervading threat of nuclear war, and poverty as structural problems arising from human sin.⁹⁵ In light of the brokenness of the world and guided by Scripture, the Confession of 1967 articulates the discernment of the UPCUSA to focus its ministry and mission on reconciliation. “The authors of the Confession of 1967 believed that God’s reconciling work in Jesus Christ was the heart of the gospel in any age and that the church of that generation was especially called to the ministry of reconciliation.”⁹⁶ This focus on reconciliation and the contemporary social issues allows the Confession of 1967 to speak prophetically and sends the church into the world with a clear understanding of its mission.

At the 178th General Assembly in 1966, the Committee of Fifteen presented their report and revisions to the Confession of 1967. The General Assembly approved the revised confession and submitted it to the presbyteries where it also gained more than the required two-thirds approval. The process of creating the *Book of Confessions* and including the Confession of 1967 was finalized at the 179th General Assembly in 1967 when it voted to approve this tremendous change to the constitution of the church.

Clifton Kirkpatrick, the former Stated Clerk of the PC(USA), notes that the Confession of 1967 “was not meant to be a comprehensive creed for all time, but a confession of faith for its

⁹⁵ Ernst-Habib, 81.

⁹⁶ Rogers, *Reading the Bible and the Confessions*, 80.

own time.”⁹⁷ The fact that the year of its passage is included in its title acknowledges its limited perspective. It does not speak to all times and all places and all situations of the church, but to the particular context the church found itself in. As the PC(USA) considers again the possibility of writing a new confession with an inclusive anthropology and missional ecclesiology, it would do well to remember this limited perspective and the call to speak to our current context.

For all its accomplishments, the Confession of 1967 missed the opportunity to articulate the church’s understanding of the role of women in the life and ministry of the church. While the *Book of Order* was amended in 1956 to include the ordination of women in all offices of the church, this change in church polity was not reflected in the Confession of 1967. This was particularly problematic as women were explicitly excluded from holding ecclesial office in both the Scots Confession and the Second Helvetic Confession, both of which were included in the new *Book of Confessions*. It would not be until A Brief Statement of Faith was adopted in 1991 that the ordination of women gained confessional status in the church.⁹⁸ If the church discerns that a new confession should be written, the committee tasked with its writing would do well to learn from this error of the writers of the Confession of 1967 and articulate the inclusive vision of ecclesial leadership in the church today.

The Belhar Confession

With its roots in the Protestant Reformation in sixteenth-century Europe, the Reformed tradition’s theology, polity, and confessions have been dominated by white men. Sexism and racism have been embedded within the church’s beliefs and teachings. It was not until the

⁹⁷ Kirkpatrick, “Preface,” xiii. The Stated Clerk of the PC(USA) is the top ecclesial official of the denomination. The Stated Clerk is elected by the General Assembly to serve a four-year term with no limit on the number of terms an individual a person may serve.

⁹⁸ The issue of the ordination of women will be discussed in more detail below in the section on A Brief Statement of Faith.

twentieth century that these biases within the Reformed tradition began to be addressed, and it is imperative for us to recognize their lingering legacy today in the life of the church. We deceive ourselves if we believe sexism and racism have been eradicated in either the church or society. While the Confession of 1967 made significant strides in addressing sexism and racism through calling the church to reconciliation, the Belhar Confession not only calls for reconciliation but names irreconciliation, oppression, and exploitation as sin.

The Belhar Confession was written in South Africa as a theological response to apartheid. According to South African theologian Rothney Tshaka, “Apartheid refers to the idea of separate development.”⁹⁹ At its core apartheid taught that people should be divided based on their racial differences. It claimed that its goal was to assist the development of all racial groups, but disproportionate power held by the white group in South Africa ensured that this was not actually the case. South African ethicist Piet Naudé observes: “Apartheid was a pervasive system that permeated every aspect of the individual and society.”¹⁰⁰ Apartheid laws dictated where people lived, went to school, and worked. It regulated who people could marry and what they were allowed to do. It was much more than a political system or policy, apartheid was “a philosophy of life and a way of perceiving reality, a lifestyle motivated by religion, a way of thinking about humanity and human beings, the arrangement of society in all its smallest details.”¹⁰¹ Apartheid created four racial classifications for South African society: white, colored, Indian, and black. The opportunities and possibilities for an individual depended on their skin tone, with more social, economic, and political opportunities available the lighter the skin tone.

⁹⁹ Tshaka, 193.

¹⁰⁰ Piet J. Naudé, *Neither Calendar Nor Clock: Perspectives on the Belhar Confession*, with a foreword by Dirk Smit (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 70.

¹⁰¹ Dirk J. Smit, “A *Status Confessionis* in South Africa,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 47 (June 1984): 43.

So how did this system of apartheid come about? Unfortunately, it must be acknowledged and confessed that the church, particularly the Reformed church, played an oversized role in the development of apartheid. As Dutch colonists moved to South Africa, they brought their church with them in the form of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). By 1799 the DRC had developed a binary system of ministry in which the congregational ministry of Europe was used for white congregants and a missionary ministry was extended to the colored and black members of the community who were ministered to in a separate meeting. While the groups were racially segregated, the church understood them to be members of the same congregation. This segregation led to a fierce debate within the church over the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In 1829 the Presbytery of Cape Town advised that people of all races should take communion together and the Synod affirmed an open table. However, these decisions were non-binding recommendations to the congregations and articulated in a way to defer to the civil government which actively discouraged integration.¹⁰² This decision gave the impression that the DRC was against color discrimination but this stance was not reflected in the local churches. Church records show that "the 'decision' of 1829 was never translated into practice."¹⁰³ In 1855 a congregation petitioned the DRC's Presbytery of Albany to allow separate communion services for different races. It attempted a compromise in which communion would be celebrated in a single service but with different tables.¹⁰⁴ Two years later a congregation brought a case to the synod seeking to have separate church facilities based on race. According to Chris Loff:

The Synod declared that according to the Bible it was clear that difference of race and colour should not cause any difference to be made in the preaching of the Gospel, but that it was also accepted that there was such a strong colour prejudice

¹⁰² Chris Loff, "The History of a Heresy," in *Apartheid Is a Heresy*, ed. John W. De Gruchy and Charles Villavicencio (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 15-7.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

among the whites that they refused to tolerate the black people in their midst, especially when it came to ‘Christian privileges’ or to Holy Communion.¹⁰⁵

The synod of 1857 opened the door for greater separation by regulating the establishment of separate congregations based on race.

By 1881, the DRC was not only creating separate congregations based on race, but a new denomination, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC). Instead of the church working to overcome the sin of racial pride, the white church asked people of other races to be the least and to leave the church. According to retired Reformed Church of America minister Douglas Fromm, “The new church was controlled by the DRC, which had veto power over all decisions. Properties were held by the DRC.”¹⁰⁶ The white DRC worked to maintain the system of segregation without giving up any control over the churches of other races. As apartheid became the established governing and cultural philosophy in South Africa in the mid-twentieth century, the DRC further segregated the church by created the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) for “blacks” in 1963 and the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA) for “Indians” in 1968.

The DRMC celebrated a century of ministry in 1981. Normally, such a milestone would be a joyous occasion, but the DRMC regarded its founding as wrong and heretical, “a testimony to the power of racism rather than the reconciling gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹⁰⁷ Instead of celebration, the centennial anniversary was an occasion for protest against the DRC and its apartheid theology, polity, and practice. By 1981, the DRMC had incorporated the language of heresy in its discussions of apartheid. Heresy has been understood by the church through the ages

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 19-20.

¹⁰⁶ Douglas W. Fromm, “The Belhar Confession in the South African Context,” *Reformed Review* 60, no. 1 (Fall 2006): 11.

¹⁰⁷ John W. De Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 189.

as the distortion of the gospel. Heresy leads to division within the church and the false witness of the church to the world.

In 1982, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) declared that the system of racial discrimination of apartheid constituted an issue of confessional status.¹⁰⁸ WARC suspended the two all-white Dutch Reformed denominations from membership and elected Allan Boesak, a leading voice in the church against apartheid, as president. As Presbyterian minister and church historian Eugene TeSelle notes: “In the case of apartheid, the Lutheran and Reformed bodies declared it a heresy, and churches which supported it were suspended from membership.”¹⁰⁹ This decision to declare apartheid a heresy was not without controversy, not because there was wide-spread support for apartheid but over the appropriateness of the label heresy. Those skeptical of the term viewed apartheid as a political ideology which should be labeled evil and sinful from a Christian perspective. For them, the category of heresy did not fit because heresy only makes sense within the context of the church and deals with true and false church. South African Reformed theologian John De Gruchy articulates clearly why the decision was ultimately made to declare apartheid a heresy: “apartheid has been justified and defended as a Christian policy based on the Bible, especially by the Afrikaans Reformed Churches. The Christian faith has thus been misused in providing moral under-pinning and theological legitimization for a racist ideology. In other words, it cannot be argued with any honesty that apartheid is simply a political programme unrelated to theology or the life of the Church.”¹¹⁰ He continues: “is apartheid a heresy? We maintain that it is, in the first instance, an anthropological

¹⁰⁸ WARC followed the lead of Lutheran World Federation which declared apartheid an issue of confessional status, *status confessionis*, in 1977. While the term *status confessionis* is sometimes used in the Reformed tradition, it properly belongs to the Lutheran tradition as its way of determining whether or not a particular issue warrants the writing of a new confession.

¹⁰⁹ Eugene TeSelle, “How Do We Recognize a Status Confessionis?” *Theology Today* 45, no. 1 (April 1988): 77.

¹¹⁰ John W. De Gruchy, “Towards a Confessing Church,” in *Apartheid Is a Heresy*, ed. John W. De Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 82.

heresy. It is based on a false view of man. This, in turn, leads to a false doctrine of the Church and of the reconciliation which God has achieved in the death and resurrection of Jesus.”¹¹¹

Apartheid was deemed a heresy because it was not just outside the church, but internal to the life and ministry of the church. It was a distortion of the gospel.

In 1982 the General Synod of the DRMC declared a *status confessionis* and unanimously voted to appoint a small commission to draft a confessional statement.¹¹² The members of this commission were Gustav Bam (chair), Allan Boesak, Jaap Durand, Isak Mentor, and Dirkie Smit. Naudé tells the story of what happened next:

After the meeting of that day, Durand and Smit met at the University of the Western Cape, close to the Belhar church, and discussed the structure of a possible confession around the themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice. Smit wrote a draft that very evening, and he and Durand discussed this draft early the next morning. It was then discussed by the whole commission. Boesak suggested minor changes to the introductory section, and after a few further editorial changes, the document was submitted to the synod. On Wednesday morning, October 6, 1982, the synod accepted the confession without any changes as a draft confession for discussion in congregations. It was formally accepted four years later at the DRMC synod of 1986.¹¹³

It is important to note that the Belhar Confession stands in a long line of theological criticisms of apartheid. It builds on: the Circuit of Wynberg decision on apartheid (DRMC, 1948), the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference's *Statement on apartheid* (1957), the Cottesloe Declaration (1961), *A Message to the People of South Africa* by the South African Council of Churches (1968), the Lutheran World Federation's "South Africa: Confessional Integrity" (1977), the *Charter and Declaration* of the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in Southern Africa (ABRECSA) (1981), an open letter by 123 DRC pastors and theologians (1982), and WARC's "Racism and South Africa" (1982). The commission which wrote the Belhar

¹¹¹ Ibid., 82-3.

¹¹² Naudé, 57, 81-2.

¹¹³ Ibid., 82.

Confession drew on the previous work of the church in confronting the heresy of apartheid and provided a distinctly Reformed response.

The Belhar Confession followed the lead of the Theological Declaration of Barmen in writing to address distortions of the church teachings without naming those whom it is condemning as heretics. Nowhere are the National Party or the white Reformed churches mentioned. Surprisingly, apartheid itself is not even mentioned. This was done because while the authors of the Belhar Confession understood themselves to be writing in the particular context of apartheid South Africa, it was addressed to and spoken on behalf of the universal church. According to Naudé, “The confession was not meant to expose persons, churches, or political parties – it intended to expose false doctrine, wherever confessed and whoever confesses it.”¹¹⁴ The writers of the Belhar Confession recognized that the heresies of apartheid were not limited to South Africa but could be and are part of churches around the world at different points in history.

Even more than the Confession of 1967, the Belhar Confession is an ethical confession. According to Reformed theologian Paul Fries, “the Belhar makes social justice rather than doctrinal purity a matter on which the gospel stands or falls.”¹¹⁵ It articulates the clear threat to the faith posed not only by false doctrine, but by false ethics as well. When the PC(USA) approved the Confession of Belhar as part of the Book of Confessions in 2016, it was largely due to the belief that it “continues to speak prophetically today, to a church in a very different cultural that continues to struggle against racism.”¹¹⁶ The hope of the PC(USA) was that the Belhar Confession’s clarity in witnessing to unity, reconciliation, and justice might help the

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 97.

¹¹⁵ Paul R. Fries, “Reflections on Confessing,” *Reformed Review* 60, no. 1 (Fall 2006): 2.

¹¹⁶ Carlos E. Wilton, *Principles of Presbyterian Polity*, with a foreword by Grayde Parsons (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2016), 18.

church speak with clarity amidst division, racism, and injustice in the contemporary United States.

The Belhar Confession continues to be a powerful faith statement in the PC(USA) through its naming of racism as sin and condemnation of apartheid as heresy. With its understandable focus on racism and apartheid, the Belhar Confession is limited in that it does not address other forms of discrimination, particularly regarding gender and sexuality. If the PC(USA) discerns that it appropriate to write a new confession, the committees responsible for drafting and revising the new confession should build on the work of the Belhar Confession in articulating a vision of human community which includes our LGBTQIA+ siblings in Christ.

A Brief Statement of Faith – Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

In 1861 the Presbyterian Church, like the United States, was divided at the outset of the Civil War. Unlike the nation, which was reunited immediately following the war in 1865, the division within the Presbyterian church was not healed for over 120 years. In the 1970s the UPCUSA and the PCUS appointed a joint Committee on Presbyterian Union to renew efforts to heal the division of the church. The PCUS had been a part of the unification talks in the 1950s which led to the formation of the UPCUSA but failed to garner enough support at the Presbytery level to reunite. “The committee presented The Plan for Reunion to the two General Assemblies in 1981, and in 1982 both bodies adopted the plan and sent it to the presbyteries. All the UPCUSA presbyteries voted positively as did three-fourths of the PCUS presbyteries, thus approving the plan.”¹¹⁷ In 1983 the General Assemblies of both denominations met concurrently in Atlanta and voted to reunify the church and form the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Included

¹¹⁷ Smylie, 141-2.

within the Articles of Agreement was the requirement that a committee be appointed representing the diversity of the church to prepare a Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith for possible inclusion in the *Book of Confessions*.

The reunited General Assembly elected Dr. J. Randolph Taylor as its moderator and tasked him with appointing the committee to write a Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith. In 1984 he appointed a twenty-one-person committee which represented the racial, gender, age, regional, and theological diversity of the new church. Perhaps for the first time in the history of Reformed creeds and confessions a group was chosen for its diversity and tasked with creating a document which inspired unity.

Taylor met with the committee in May to discuss with them their mandate. He understood the committee as having five tasks: 1) to help the church reassert its identity as the people of God; 2) to introduce and reintroduce the Presbyterian tradition in the wider American and church family; 3) to challenge the new denomination to theological discussion; 4) to help the church focus on the essentials in its beliefs and practices; and 5) to call the church to be a confessing church.¹¹⁸ In short, this committee was charged with articulating the identity of the new denomination. Taylor understood that in the process of unification, the church had the opportunity to articulate its identity afresh. He also recognized the challenge inherent in this undertaking given the diversity within the committee. The committee tasked with writing the Brief Statement of Faith recognized that theological consensus was lacking within the denomination to produce an elaborate theological construction like the Confession of 1967. In an

¹¹⁸ Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds*, 18-9.

effort to establish the identity of the new denomination, and to avoid the entrenchment of factionalism, the committee elected to lift up the basic, common faith of Presbyterians.¹¹⁹

The clarification about denominational identity was pressing not only because of the formation of the new denomination, but also in light of the cultural changes taking place within the United States. Particularly alarming for churches was the increasing secularism of the nation as people left the church. According to Rogers:

Mainline denominations, including the Presbyterians, did not regain the public's attention until massive research began to document their precipitous decline in membership. Between 1965 and 1985, Presbyterians lost 25 percent of their members. This loss in size was accompanied by increased financial strains and an awareness of diminishing public influence. Religion became very individualistic for most Americans. Those who attended church had little denominational awareness or loyalty.¹²⁰

This decline has not abated. When the PC(USA) was formed it reported having over 3 million members; in 2020 the denomination reported having 1.24 million members.¹²¹ As the PC(USA) was being formed, the church was witnessing an erosion of its influence not only culturally, but in the lives of people who had been a part of the faith community. As the church evaluated this decline, one of the pressing issues which quickly became apparent was the need to use contemporary language in the life of the church. According to Carlos Wilton, the former Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of Monmouth, “the General Assembly saw the need for a brief expression of the Reformed faith in modern language, suitable for use as a creed by God’s people in worship.”¹²² The creeds and confessions used in worship on Sunday morning employed the technical theological language of Reformation era Europe or earlier. What was needed was a

¹¹⁹ George H. Kehm, “The Contemporaneity of the Brief Statement of Faith,” in *To Confess the Faith Today*, ed. Jack L. Stotts and Jane Dempsey Douglas (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 84-5.

¹²⁰ Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds*, 236.

¹²¹ Office of the General Assembly, Comparative Summaries Of Statistics, accessed May 13, 2021. https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/2020_comparative_stats.pdf.

¹²² Wilton, 18.

clear articulation of the faith in contemporary language. The introduction of contemporary language also would, the committee hoped, signal a shift in the life of the church from being past-oriented to present- and future-oriented.

Embracing the challenge of writing a new Brief Statement of Faith, the committee saw and grasped the opportunity to fill in some of the gaps of previous creeds and confessions. “Though the Statement often echoes earlier confessions, it introduces aspects of our common faith that were missing in earlier creeds or that seem to us today to need greater emphasis than they have previously received.”¹²³ It provided a narrative of the life and ministry of Jesus which had previously been overlooked. It addresses the urgency of the ecological crisis and calls for the church to listen those often overlooked.¹²⁴ It expands the understanding of sin to include not only rebelling against God, but also hiding from God and acknowledges the importance of self-care. Because of the concise nature of the Brief Statement of Faith, none of these topics gets developed and fleshed out, but they each point the church in important directions for the life and ministry of the church. The writing of a new inclusive and missional confession would be the opportunity for the church to build on the Brief Statement of Faith and develop these topics further.

The most pressing issues which the committee was tasked with addressing were the role of women in the church and the gendered language used for God. Let us look at the issue of the gendered language of God first. According to Presbyterian womanist theologian Clarice Martin, “The predominance of exclusive male imagery for God and humankind has, in the view of many

¹²³ Jack L. Stotts and Jane Dempsey Douglas, “Introduction,” in *To Confess the Faith Today*, ed. Jack L. Stotts and Jane Dempsey Douglas (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 10.

¹²⁴ David Willis-Wilkins, “The Ecumenical Significance of the Brief Statement of Faith,” in *To Confess the Faith Today*, ed. Jack L. Stotts and Jane Dempsey Douglas (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 59.

theologians, biblical scholars, and clergy, promoted the idolatrous view of God as male.”¹²⁵ By using only male language for God, the church taught the faithful to view God as male. Since God was understood to be male, women were subordinated in the life of the church and society. Feminist theology has worked to expose and undo this cycle of subordination through the use of inclusive language about God. This inclusive language is not new or foreign to the faith, as Scripture itself uses male and female language for God. A Brief Statement of Faith reclaims the inclusive language of God in the Bible. In doing so it intentionally broadens our understanding of God and challenges idolatrous images of God as male. This inclusive language is extended to humanity as well. In previous creeds and confessions, including the Confession of 1967, the term “men” is used for all of humanity. A Brief Statement of Faith uses humanity, people, and women and men to talk about humanity in an effort to be more inclusive. This drive for more inclusive language for God and humanity is an important contribution of A Brief Statement of Faith. Since its writing, the church has become increasingly aware of the limitations of the binary male and female language for humanity. Should the General Assembly decide to create a committee to write a new statement of faith, the inclusive impulse of the church should be heeded and broader, non-binary language used.

The other pressing issue for the special committee was how to address the issue of the ordination of women. Women have been ordained as deacons in the church since 1906, as elders since 1911, and as ministers since 1957. While the polity and practice of the church had changed to include women in all offices of the church, the ministry of women lacked confessional standing; indeed both the Scots Confession and the Second Helvetic Confession explicitly state

¹²⁵ Clarice J. Martin, “Inclusive Language and the Brief Statement of Faith: Widening the Margins in Our Common Confession,” in *To Confess the Faith Today*, ed. Jack L. Stotts and Jane Dempsey Douglas (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 114.

that women should not administer baptism.¹²⁶ The conflict between the practice of the church and the theological statements in its creeds and confessions came to a head in 1974 over the ordination of Walter Wynn Kenyon. Kenyon was going through the ordination process in Pittsburgh Presbytery and informed the Candidates and Credentials Committee that he opposed the ordination of women based on passages in Scripture which prohibit women serving in leadership roles. Kenyon, following the lead of one of his Pittsburgh Theological Seminary professors, Dr. John Gerstner Jr., argued that the ordination of women was not an essential tenet of the church. Using the scruple mechanism put in place with the Adopting Act of 1729 Kenyon was making known his disagreement with the church while also seeking to serve as one of its ministers. The Candidates and Credential Committee recommended against ordaining Kenyon, but Pittsburgh Presbytery overruled its committee and voted to approve his ordination. The decision of Pittsburgh Presbytery to move ahead with Kenyon's ordination was appealed, triggering the judicial process of the church. The synod reversed the decision of Pittsburgh Presbytery, which in turn appealed to the Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly, the top judicial authority of the church. The Permanent Judicial Commission declared that the equality of men and women was an essential tenet of the church, thus barring Kenyon from ordination.

The decision of the Permanent Judicial Commission made it clear that the equality of men and women, including in the offices of the church, was an essential tenet of the church yet sexism remained in the life of the church. Jack Rogers, a member of the special committee tasked with writing the Brief Statement of Faith, reports: "The women seminary professors on

¹²⁶ This stance of the Scots Confession and the Second Helvetic Confession was a direct repudiation of the Roman Catholic practice of permitting nuns and midwives to baptize infants if it was feared that they might die to prevent them from suffering eternal punishment in hell.

the Brief Statement of Faith Committee noted that contemporary male seminarians cited these earlier statements in the *Book of Confessions* to argue that women seminarians did not have a valid call to ministry. These women felt that it was necessary, thirty-five years after the decision to ordain women to the ministry, to have a specific confessional warrant for ordination.”¹²⁷ In the section on the Holy Spirit, A Brief Statement of Faith affirms that the Spirit “calls women and men to all ministries of the church.”¹²⁸ Through this simple and concise statement, the church insists on gender equality. According to Jack Stotts and Jane Dempsey Douglas, two of the members of the special committee, “perhaps for the first time in the history of the church, a confessional statement declares as a matter of the faith of the church that the Holy Spirit calls women as well as men to all the public ministries of the church. This declaration consciously repudiates older confessional teaching.”¹²⁹ A Brief Statement of Faith builds on the practice and polity of the church going back to 1906, and the judicial decision of the Kenyon case in 1975, to affirm the ministry of women and grant it confessional standing. A new confession would build on the Brief Statement of Faith and grant confessional standing to LGBTQIA+ ordination and marriage. Unfortunately, A Brief Statement of Faith has not eliminated sexism from the life of the church, but it does provide an important tool for combatting it.

Included within the Articles of Agreement which formed the PC(USA) was the stipulation that a committee be formed to write a Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith, but there were some within the new denomination who opposed the writing of a new confessional statement. For them, “reunion provided ‘the *occasion* for a new statement of faith, but it was not obvious that it offered an adequate *reason*.’”¹³⁰ They argued that there was no existential crisis

¹²⁷ Rogers, *Reading the Bible and the Confessions*, 106.

¹²⁸ “A Brief Statement of Faith – Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),” in *The Book of Confessions*, 11.4, 312.

¹²⁹ Stotts and Dempsey Douglas, 11.

¹³⁰ Ernst-Habib, 85.

confronting the church which called for a new confession. For both the special committee which wrote A Brief Statement of Faith and the Committee of Fifteen which revised it, the challenges facing the church made A Brief Statement of Faith necessary. Others, however, “suggested that the issue was not whether a confession was necessary at this time, but whether it might be desirable and possible. It could provide a visible expression of the church’s unity, enhance mutual trust among its members, and provide the church with a needed theological identity.”¹³¹ The standard of writing a confession when it is beneficial to the church is a more lenient standard than only writing a confession when it is absolutely necessary. The concern might be that the church would too easily enter the confession writing process, altering its theology at whim. However, the polity around amending the *Book of Confessions* makes the process intentionally lengthy and requires overwhelming support of the church. The church continually confronts the challenge of maintaining what it has believed in the past while also speaking relevantly in the present and future. By requiring new confessional statements only to be written in moments of existential crisis, the church loses its ability to discern other situations when it is called to proclaim what it believes in new ways.

Having met with Moderator Taylor in 1984, the special committee started its work of crafting A Brief Statement of Faith. An initial draft was completed with unanimous support of the committee and submitted to the church for comment in February of 1988. Over fifteen thousand reply forms were returned to the committee, who worked through the responses and made amendments in light of them. They submitted a revised draft to the General Assembly in 1989. The General Assembly received the draft and charged the new moderator, Joan Salmon Campbell, to appoint a Committee of Fifteen to study the draft and make revisions, which it did

¹³¹ Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds*, 239.

in coordination with the original drafting committee. In 1990, the Committee of Fifteen submitted a revised draft of A Brief Statement of Faith to the General Assembly where it passed, without further changes, with 94% support. It then went to the presbyteries where it gained the requisite two thirds support before being ratified by the 1991 General Assembly as the eleventh document in the *Book of Confessions*.

A Brief Statement of Faith was designed to be used liturgically in the worship of the church. Its style is modeled after that of the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds as it was intended to be recited aloud by groups. This style makes it easier to incorporate into worship services, but also limits it in its depth. A Brief Statement of Faith includes lines about women and men in ministry, the ecological crisis, and racial reconciliation, but none of these important themes are fully developed theologically. Rather, they serve as important pointers for the direction of the life and ministry of the church. A new confessional statement for the 21st century would provide the church the opportunity to build upon the work of A Brief Statement of Faith by providing theological depth to its affirmations. It would additionally provide the opportunity for the creeds and confessions to catch up with current PC(USA) practice and polity by granting confessional status to the LGBTQIA+ community and ministers.

Still Reforming

The new confessions of the twentieth century were written to address the false teachings of the church and to build the identity and purpose of the church. These confessions built on the Reformed tradition to speak to their contexts. The Theological Declaration of Barmen returns to the traditional Reformed objection to idolatry and applies it to the Nazification of the church in Germany. Additionally, Barmen makes it clear that domination and exploitation are theological and ethical concerns of the church and warrant a confessional response. The Confession of 1967

was written to update the doctrinal standards of the church to reflect its contemporary theology and practice. Its focus on reconciliation and social justice demonstrates how creeds and confessions are not merely about church doctrine but also church action. Likewise, the Belhar Confession is an ethical confession with a call to action in the church. For Belhar this call to action was centered around the rejection of apartheid as a heresy. The Brief Statement of Faith was written to form the identity of the church during a period of transition and change. It also established a precedent in the church for writing a new confession when it is beneficial and corrects errors of the church in previous creeds and confessions. The writing of a new inclusive and missional confession would build on these previous confession as the church seeks to speak to the world today.

Contemporary heresies continue to divide the church today, particularly in the form of sexism, heterosexism, racism, and Christian nationalism. The impulse to focus on the mission of the church rather than confront these heresies, while well intended, fails to grasp how these distortions of the gospel sow division within congregations and prevent them from being faithful witnesses of Jesus Christ to the world.

It is also important for the PC(USA) to recognize that it is in another period of transition in which it is called to articulate its identity and purpose anew. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how we think about being the church and the recent Gallup poll which showed less than 50% of Americans are members of a religious organization reveals the need for the church to speak in new ways to our communities.¹³² In order for the church to remain relevant in the community and world, it must speak to the needs and questions of the community and world. A new confession would not only articulate the traditional theological themes in new and relevant

¹³² See Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," Gallup. Last modified March 29, 2021. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

ways but speak prophetically about the role of the church in confronting the ecological crisis and communicate an inclusive vision of the Kingdom of God.

Chapter 3: Confronting Contemporary Heresies

When the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) gathers to consider whether to write a new confession, one of the arguments against will be that we are not in a confessional moment. As I have talked with ministers and other church leaders about the possibility of the PC(USA) writing a new confession there is some concern that there is not a crisis or theological disagreement which requires the writing of a new confession. The denomination has a large collection of policies and theological statements, they say, why not go that route to address some of the challenges facing the church today instead of going through the arduous process of writing a new confession?

While the contemporary church prefers to talk about heresies in the past tense, contemporary heresies are distorting the life, message, and mission of the church. Four contemporary heresies which need to be addressed by the church, not merely in another theological statement buried in the records of the denominational offices in Louisville but in the very faith statements which guide and shape the church, are racism, sexism, heterosexism, and Christian nationalism. The first three of these heresies are anthropological heresies; they distort the church's understanding of what it means to be human and in doing so corrupt the church's understanding of God and its own purpose and mission. For centuries the church has based its understanding of humanity on white, straight, cis men, leading to the view that other forms of human existence are in some way inferior.¹³³ According to womanist ethicist and theologian Marcia Riggs:

¹³³ Cis is defined by feminist and queer theologian Linn Marie Tonstad, as when a person identifies "with the gender assigned to them at birth." See Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018), 88-9.

traditional theological reflection has led us astray into denial of the *imago Dei*, the image of God, in each of us and consequently into denial of that which makes us capable of being and acting morally. The *imago Dei* in each of us must not be relegated to something essentially human nor to a way of relating to one another that is contingent on our ability to transcend or ignore our embodied differences. We, in our all our embodied difference, incarnate the *imago Dei*.¹³⁴

At the core of the Christian understanding of what it means to be human is the claim that we are *imago Dei*, created in the image of God. Yet within Christianity a hierarchy has been created where some people are more in the image of God and others less in the image of God. White, straight, cis men have been placed at the top of the hierarchy, with all others descending the hierarchy based on race, gender, sexuality, and gender identity.¹³⁵

This anthropological hierarchy is not natural to the Christian faith but is a heretical distortion. Feminist theologian Letty Russell, observes, “Jesus’ message is that all persons are created by God and are welcome in God’s household.”¹³⁶ The starting point for our understanding of what it means to be human should not be based on the prejudices and distortions of the last two thousand years, but the fundamental claim all people are created by God and bear the image of God. Feminist theologian Mary McClintock Fulkerson writes, “The Reformed conviction that God is at work reforming all reality sets up a logic that requires us to ask new questions about previously accepted social arrangements, always alert to human

¹³⁴ Marcia Riggs, “Living as Religious Ethical Mediators: A Vocation for People of Faith in the Twenty-first Century,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics*, ed. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 249-50.

¹³⁵ The structure of this hierarchy means that many people face various types of oppression. Throughout his book *Rainbow Theology*, Patrick Cheng speaks of his experience of not fitting in with the Asian American community because of his sexuality and not truly belonging to the gay community because of his race. See Patrick S. Cheng, *Rainbow Theology: Bridging Race, Sexuality, and Spirit* (New York: Seabury Books, 2013). The layers of oppression in society is a prominent theme in Womanist theology as well. For example, see the articles by Katie Geneva Cannon, Marcia Riggs, Emilie M. Townes, M. Shawn Copeland, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Angela D. Sims in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, edited by Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

¹³⁶ Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 25.

deformations of the *imago Dei*.”¹³⁷ The church today does not need to simply repeat what the church has said through the ages. We cannot perpetuate the prejudices of the past but are called to articulate a theological anthropology which celebrates the full humanity of every person.

As God’s beloved, humanity is created to flourish. For feminist theologian Serene Jones, human flourishing is the heart of feminist theology. God wills for all people to flourish and “as people of faith, Christians are called to follow God’s will and seek out conditions for that flourishing.”¹³⁸ But what does it mean to flourish? Jones sees the capitalist definition of flourishing as social and economic productivity along with the cultural definition of flourishing as individual self-sufficiency as deeply flawed as they perpetuate systems and practices of oppression and isolation.¹³⁹ Rather, flourishing for Jones is living “as the creatures that God created us to be, and for our lives to bear witness to the grace that God has bestowed upon us.”¹⁴⁰ Flourishing serves Jones as an ethical ideal juxtaposed with suffering and oppression. For Jones, the flourishing of women and other historically marginalized groups is essential. For too long, the flourishing of the few (primarily wealthy, white men) has been achieved through the oppression of others (particularly women, people of color, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and the poor). God’s vision of flourishing is for all humanity.

Racism, heterosexism, sexism, and Christian nationalism are inconsistent with Reformed theology, distorting not only our understanding of human nature but of the God who creates humanity in God’s image. A new confession with an inclusive anthropology would give the

¹³⁷ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “The *Imago Dei* and a Reformed Logic for Feminist/Womanist Critique,” in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 100.

¹³⁸ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 52.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 85-6.

¹⁴⁰ Serene Jones, *Trauma & Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, 2d ed, with a foreword by Kelly Brown Douglas (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019) 86.

church a deeper understanding of what it means to be human. In rejecting racism, heterosexism, sexism, and Christian nationalism as heresy the church is not looking to conduct a series of heresy trials but to articulate a constructive theology acknowledging the full humanity of every person.

Racism

One of the most pervasive ways in which people are divided is race. The issue of race is one of the most pressing issues in American society today, including within the life of the church. Racial distinctions have been embedded in our culture, leading us to believe that they are a part of our human nature. In reality, the very concept of race is a human construct used to categorize ourselves and others. This racial categorizing is not some neutral way of grouping people together but is a way of maintaining power. Kerry Connelly, an author and consultant who specializes in anti-racism work, writes: “*Racism* refers to a system of hierarchy based on the belief that one race is superior to all others.”¹⁴¹ Throughout her book *Good White Racist? Confronting Your Role in Racial Injustice*, Connelly argues that the issue confronting our churches, nation, and world today is not racism in general but *white* racism in particular. Racism is an expression of white power.

Racism goes beyond the bigotry of individuals to the very structures and systems of our society. According to Allan Boesak, a leading South African Reformed theologian and one of the authors of the Belhar Confession, “It is not merely a vague feeling of racial superiority, but a system of *domination*, furnished with social, political, and economic structures of domination.”¹⁴² American society is structured to give white people an advantage and people of

¹⁴¹ Kerry Connelly, *Good White Racist? Confronting Your Role in Racial Injustice*, with a foreword by Michael W. Waters (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 14.

¹⁴² Allan A. Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist Tradition*, ed. Leonard Sweetman (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 102.

all other races a disadvantage based solely on the color of their skin or their ethnic identity. Intentionally and unintentionally, social power and prejudice come together to treat people differently. We see structural racism show up in our society in housing discrimination, government policies which limit access education, employment, and voting rights, and mass incarceration.

Racism, though, does more than limit opportunities and possibilities, it denies the full humanity of people. According to Boesak, “the humanity of a black person is not even seen as true humanity.”¹⁴³ This denial of humanity not only targets black people, but all people of color, “including but not limited to, African Americans, Asian Americans, Latina/os, and Indigenous people.”¹⁴⁴ Racism says that only white people are fully human; that people of all other races and ethnicities are subhuman. It denies that all people are made in the image of God.

James Cone, one of the leading Black theologians of the twentieth century and founding figure in Black Liberation Theology, describes his experience growing up with racism as a child in Arkansas in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. He writes: “I was born in Arkansas, a lynching state. During my childhood, white supremacy ruled supreme. White people were virtually free to do anything to blacks with impunity. The violent crosses of the Ku Klux Klan were a familiar reality, and white racists preached a dehumanizing segregated gospel in the name of Jesus’ cross every Sunday.”¹⁴⁵ Cone’s experience was not unique. Across the United States and throughout the world, racism is at work denying the humanity of people of color. Growing up in Michigan I was taught that racism was a southern problem; we did not have the same history of slavery and were on the “right side” during the Civil War. Yet racism is not limited to the American south. It

¹⁴³ Ibid., 45.

¹⁴⁴ Cheng, 10.

¹⁴⁵ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), xv.

is pervasive throughout our society and world. Cone observes that while the white southerners lost the Civil War, they managed to win the cultural war as America continues to be defined as a white nation with people of color deemed inferior and unworthy of equality.¹⁴⁶ Cone notes: “Nothing was more detested by whites than the idea that blacks were equal to them.”¹⁴⁷ The denial of equality for people of color, indeed, the denial of their humanity, is embedded in the very fabric of American society. From cradle to grave, people are taught that people of color are inferior, less human, and therefore not deserving of basic human rights.¹⁴⁸

How did racism get its start? This is the question which leading black theologians Willie Jennings and J. Kameron Carter study extensively in their books *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* and *Race: A Theological Account*.¹⁴⁹ Jennings and Carter trace the origins of racism back to the church, particularly the advent of European exploration and colonization at the end of the fifteenth century. Pope Alexander VI issued a papal bull granting Europeans the divine right to subdue, enslave, capture, steal from, and even kill the residents of any lands not dominated by Christians. In this papal bull Pope Alexander VI used racist language encouraging Europeans to dominate and oppress these mostly black and brown populations in the name of the church. As Carter notes, “modernity’s racial imagination is religious in nature.”¹⁵⁰ Racism as we know it today has its roots in the theology and life of the church.

The church’s involvement in racism is not merely historical though. According to Jennings, “Christianity in the Western world lives and moves within a diseased social

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 6.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 128.

¹⁴⁸ Katie Geneva Canon, “Racism and Economics: The Perspective of Oliver C. Cox,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 4.

¹⁴⁹ See Willie J. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) and J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁵⁰ Carter, 5.

imagination.”¹⁵¹ The church continues to view the world and itself through the lens of racism. Its theology continues to have racism embedded within it. The church maintains a commitment to abstract theology, particularly around the notion of grace, which fails to address the concrete structures of oppression experienced by people of color.¹⁵² Abstract theology in the church leads to an abstract mode of living the Christian faith.¹⁵³

Cone and Boesak are highly critical of the church for its failure to confront racism. Cone observes that white theologians, ministers, and congregations have failed to address the issue of racism because they have either openly supported slavery, segregation, and lynching or have remained silent about them.¹⁵⁴ Likewise, Boesak writes, “The church has not been successful in struggling against racism in society, because it has not yet learned how to deal with it in the church itself.”¹⁵⁵ Boesak and Cone rightly argue that the church cannot be effective or authentic in confronting the issue of racism in society while it perpetuates racism internally. This means that race cannot be ignored within the church or delegated to a theological topic for theologians of color. Race is critical for the theology and ethics of the church, yet, as Katie Geneva Cannon, the leading womanist ethicist and theologian in the PC(USA) before her death, noted: “The contributions of African American Christians to Reformed faith and doctrine have been largely ignored.”¹⁵⁶ As a predominantly white denomination striving to dismantle structural racism, the PC(USA) needs to listen to the voices of people of color, both those within and beyond the

¹⁵¹ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 6.

¹⁵² Katie Geneva Cannon, “Transformative Grace,” in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology, ed. Amy Plantinga Paus and Serene Jones (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 140.

¹⁵³ Carter, 160.

¹⁵⁴ Cone, 131.

¹⁵⁵ Boesak, 49.

¹⁵⁶ Cannon, “Transformative Grace,” 140.

bounds of the denomination. These voices have long been ignored by congregations, presbyteries, synods, and the denomination.

Racism within the PC(USA) was on full display at the 2020 General Assembly as attempts to discuss a statement on Black women and girls were continually blocked. Using parliamentary procedures designed to maintain control for the powerful, the General Assembly ignored the advocacy of the Rev. Denise Anderson and the Rev. Terri Allen, both of whom are Black clergywomen. Following the General Assembly, a group of sixteen former moderators, vice-moderators, and co-moderators of the General Assembly issued “A Common Statement on Racism” stating:

We watched with great joy as the Assembly elected two capable leaders as Co-Moderators, both of whom are BIPOC (an umbrella term for Black, Indigenous, and people of color), including our denomination’s first Indigenous Moderator. We saw commissioners exhibit great enthusiasm for racial justice, even amid an abbreviated Assembly. However, we also witnessed micro- and macro-aggressions towards the Co-moderators, commissioners, corresponding members, BIPOC generally and Black women specifically in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). And, despite numerous attempts by commissioners, the 224th General Assembly adjourned without addressing the plight of Black women and girls.¹⁵⁷

Shortened by the COVID-19 pandemic and conducted virtually for the first time, the 2020 General Assembly’s work was limited to items which required immediate action. One of its actions was to accept the report entitled “On the Church in this Moment in History: Responding to the Sin of Racism and a Call to Action.” In accepting this report, the General Assembly affirmed its commitment to anti-racism work. Yet there were concerns raised that the report did not adequately address the issue of Black women and girls and an amendment was offered.

¹⁵⁷ Neal Presa, “A common statement on racism, advocacy for Black women and girls, and the 224th General Assembly (2020) — From past moderators, co-moderators, and vice moderators of the General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and predecessor Church,” The Presbyterian Outlook. Last modified June 30, 2020. <https://pres-outlook.org/2020/06/a-common-statement-on-racism-advocacy-for-black-women-and-girls-and-the-224th-general-assembly/>. This statement was signed by 16 former moderators, vice-moderators, and co-moderators of the PC(USA)’s General Assembly.

Because of the limited structure of this General Assembly, the General Assembly itself would have needed to vote to change its rules to consider the amendment. Every attempt to discuss the statement was blocked.¹⁵⁸ The sixteen former moderators, vice-moderators, and co-moderators of the General Assembly were direct in their analysis of what transpired at the General Assembly in their statement: “what occurred at the 224th General Assembly was nothing short of white supremacy, white privilege, misogyny, and hypocrisy expressed as indifference, apathy, and outright inaction. These ubiquitous viruses are what is endemic in society, and, sadly, in the Church.”¹⁵⁹ In a denomination that sees itself as called to dismantle structural racism, white supremacy and white privilege endure as powerful forces.

At the end of their “A Common Statement on Racism,” the sixteen former moderators, vice-moderators, and co-moderators issue a call to confession, inviting all the various congregations and entities which make up the PC(USA) “to reckon with, confess, and repent of white supremacy.”¹⁶⁰ These leaders of the church are clear that racism is a sin. However, racism is more than a sin, it is a heresy. South African Reformed theologian John De Gruchy defines

¹⁵⁸ The reasons for the blocking the discussion of revising “On the Church in this Moment in History: Responding to the Sin of Racism a Call to Action” were complicated. First, for conservative groups within the church, the statement itself was perceived as a political statement with which they disagreed. As a predominantly white denomination, there are many within the PC(USA) who seek to avoid conversations about race and structural racism. For these groups, expanding the initial statement to address the experiences of Black women and girls would only further distract the church from its intended focus of worshipping God.

The second reason this attempt at amending the statement on racism was blocked was due to the polity structure of the PC(USA) in general and the General Assembly in particular. Presbyterians are taught to operate “decently and in order.” Leading up to the 2020 General Assembly the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly (COGA), which is responsible for planning and organizing the General Assembly and setting the agenda, decided to change the rules of the General Assembly to fit a condensed, virtual meeting. These rule changes deferred all actions of the General Assembly to 2022 except those deemed essential by COGA. The items COGA found to be essential were those pertaining to finances and filling the various denominational committees and appointments. This meant that issues relating to revisions of the *Book of Order* and social and ecological justice were deferred for two years. This decision of COGA was controversial in the denomination as many leaders saw and continue to see these issues as essential to the life of the church. The General Assembly, however, has the authority to overrule COGA; it has the option to change the rules for itself. COGA and the Stated Clerk, the Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson, II, argued strongly against the General Assembly changing the rules making many commissioners reticent to change the rules to allow the General Assembly to discuss the particular forms of oppression experienced by Black women and girls.

¹⁵⁹ Presa, “A common statement on racism.”

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

heresy as “the distortion of the truth revealed in Jesus Christ, and something that not only leads to division but also to a false witness in the world.”¹⁶¹ In denying the full humanity of people of color and denying that they are made in the image of God, racism distorts the Christian faith. It cuts to the very heart of the gospel which claims that God loves each person and extends grace and love to all. Racism denies these fundamental truths of the Christian faith and corrupts the life and witness of the church.

In the Belhar Confession the PC(USA) acknowledges the heresy of racism. Yet Belhar was written in South Africa forty years ago. As the church continues to confront racism, it needs a contemporary statement written in the American context. It is not enough to wait for another church to write a contemporary faith statement which condemns racism and place our stamp of approval upon it. The church is called speak out in a clear voice against the sin and heresy of racism.

Heterosexism

Racism is not the only way in which groups of people are being dehumanized. Over the last 20-30 years, there has been increasing focus in the church on the fight over inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community. While some denominations and congregations have moved to include this long-excluded community many others have argued that homosexuality and transgendered identity place people outside the community of grace and faith. Heterosexism is the belief that heterosexual relations are the human norm and only acceptable expression of human sexuality.

According feminist and queer theologian Linn Marie Tonstad:

Heteronormativity, the naturalization of the sociopolitical system of heterosexuality within patriarchy, teaches us that there are two and only two sexes whose anatomy or genes determine their gender, and who are naturally oriented to each other in terms of romantic and sexual desire in a way that finds its highest

¹⁶¹ De Gruchy, “Towards a Confessing Church,” 81.

fulfillment and aim in marriage and reproduction. But heteronormativity is not natural in the way it pretends to be; it is the effect of cultural system that enforces heterosexuality throughout.¹⁶²

For centuries, heterosexuality has been seen as the norm in the church and Western society prompting many to assume that it is “natural.” This characterization of “natural” has led the church to historically describe all other sexual identities as unnatural and distorted, leading those who have not conformed to the norm to be treated as less than fully human.

Many Christians are hostile to LGBTQIA+ individuals because they believe that any sexual relationship outside of lifelong, monogamous, heterosexual marriages are contrary to faithful living.¹⁶³ Complementarianism, the view that men and women are created by God to complement and fulfill each other, is the accepted view of human sexuality in many churches, especially conservative evangelical congregations and denominations. The Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) was founded in 1987 by leading evangelicals such as John Piper and Wayne Grudem to articulate and perpetuate their view of the complementary differences between men and women. CBMW has close ties with the Southern Baptist Convention and the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA), both of whom have adopted the Nashville Statement (2017). The Nashville Statement is a theological confession written by CBMW articulating heterosexism and complementarianism as essential to properly understanding human nature from a Christian perspective. In the Nashville Statement’s preamble, CBMW writes:

As Western culture has become increasingly post-Christian, it has embarked upon a massive revision of what it means to be a human being. By and large the spirit of our age no longer discerns or delights in the beauty of God’s design for human life. Many deny that God created human beings for his glory, and that his good purposes for us include our personal and physical design as male and female. It is

¹⁶² Tonstad, 58.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 5.

common to think that human identity as male and female is not part of God's beautiful plan, but is, rather, an expression of an individual's autonomous preferences. The pathway to full and lasting joy through God's good design for his creatures is thus replaced by the path of shortsighted alternatives that, sooner or later, ruin human life and dishonor God.¹⁶⁴

CBMW and the PCA operate with a static view of humanity. According to them God imprints upon us at our creation our maleness or femaleness and God's design for human gender and sex is intentionally and originally binary.¹⁶⁵ The Nashville Statement states: "Our true identity, as male and female persons, is given by God. It is not only foolish, but hopeless, to try to make ourselves what God did not create us to be."¹⁶⁶ For CBMW and the PCA sex and gender are essential qualities of our humanity, unchanging from our creation. This is a limited perspective which fails to appreciate how we as human beings are socially constructed. According to Mihee Kim-Kort, a Korean-American queer theologian and PC(USA) minister, "gender is not an unchanging characteristic of inwardness, of our deepest identities."¹⁶⁷ For Kim-Kort, it is a mistake to reduce our identities to one aspect such as sexuality. We are not the same people we were at the moments of our birth but are shaped by our experiences and relationships.

For CBMW and the PCA any denial of the static, binary sexuality of humanity is a rejection of God's creation. Transgender and homosexual identities are understood by them to be inherently sinful. The PCA's Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality refers to homosexual attraction as a form of "sinfully disordered desires."¹⁶⁸ Likewise, the Nashville Statement denies that homosexuality and transgenderism "is consistent with God's holy purposes in creation and

¹⁶⁴ The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Coalition for Biblical Sexuality, "Nashville Statement," Preamble. Accessed November 30, 2021. <https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement/>.

¹⁶⁵ *Report of the Presbyterian Church in American Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality*, by Bryan Chapell, chairman (Lawrenceville: General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2020), 26-7.

¹⁶⁶ "Nashville Statement," Preamble.

¹⁶⁷ Tonstad, 31.

¹⁶⁸ *Report of the Presbyterian Church in American Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality*, 23.

redemption.”¹⁶⁹ By labeling these identities as sinful and contrary to God’s plan and vision for humanity these churches have made it clear that LGBTQIA+ persons not are welcome in the church. They are seen as sinful and dirty; their identity makes them enemies of God.

According to CBMW and the PCA, sexuality is an issue of salvation. Homosexuality and transgenderism according to these groups is a special kind of sin which places a person beyond the grace and salvation of God. For CBMW and the PCA there can be no salvation for individuals who are unrepentantly LGBQIA+; eternal life is only for those who adhere to the heteronormative views of the church. In the Nashville Statement CBMW declares: “WE DENY that the grace of God in Christ sanctions self-conceptions that are at odds with God’s revealed will.”¹⁷⁰ Here CBMW is claiming that homosexuality and transgenderism is inconsistent with God’s grace; that LGBTQIA+ people cannot experience God’s grace and love unless they conform to the heteronormative views of the church.

Likewise, the PCA proclaims: “The Christian answer to the question, ‘Why must sex be within heterosexual marriage?’ gets us into the very heart of the gospel.”¹⁷¹ For the PCA, the issue of human sexuality and gender identity cannot be separated from the core Christian beliefs around grace and salvation. This is a shocking development for a denomination whose roots go back to the Protestant Reformation and the Reformed leader John Calvin. Even if the PCA were to see homosexuality and transgenderism as a sin, Reformed theology from Calvin onward has focused on God’s grace preceding our transformation and sanctification. It is through God’s grace that we as sinners are justified and sanctified. What the PCA seems to be suggesting in their *Report of the Presbyterian Church in American Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality*

¹⁶⁹ “Nashville Statement,” Article 7.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., Article 13.

¹⁷¹ *Report of the Presbyterian Church in American Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality*, 40.

is that LGBTQIA+ individuals must first change who they are in order for God to extend grace to them. This is contrary to the witness of both Scripture and the Westminster Confession of Faith, which they claim “give us unchanging theological principles.”¹⁷² The core theological principles of God’s grace and love have been subordinated to heterosexism.

It is not just LGBTQIA+ individuals who are outside God’s grace, but according to CBMW so too are individuals and churches who include them into the life of faith. Article 10 of the Nashville Statement proclaims: “WE AFFIRM that it is sinful to approve of homosexual immorality or transgenderism and that such approval constitutes an essential departure from Christian faithfulness and witness.”¹⁷³ Seeing the move to inclusion in some mainline denominations such as the PC(USA) and the Episcopal Church, CBMW declares that these inclusive congregations and denominations have strayed from the gospel into heresy.

The charge against the PC(USA) and other inclusive denominations and congregations is that they have abandoned “biblical marriage.” According to the PCA, “Marriage was instituted by God for the mutual help and blessing of husband and wife, for procreation and the raising together of godly children, and to prevent sexual immorality.”¹⁷⁴ For the PCA and CBMW, there is only one biblical understanding of marriage: between one man and one woman.¹⁷⁵ Kim-Kort

¹⁷² Ibid., 33.

¹⁷³ “Nashville Statement,” Article 10.

¹⁷⁴ *Report of the Presbyterian Church in American Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality*, 6.

¹⁷⁵ While CBMW and the PCA are not a part of the PC(USA), their advocacy of heterosexism and sexism is significant for the PC(USA) as it discerns its calling to write a new confession. First, the heterosexism and sexism espoused by CBMW and the PCA are present, though not prevalent, in the PC(USA). These perspectives are often brought into PC(USA) congregations by people reading books written by CBMW and PCA authors. Second, the PCA is part of the same Reformed tradition as the PC(USA) and are seen as our estranged siblings. We share a long history together and many of the same theological foundations, but we are responsible to address distortions of the faith which corrupt the church’s life and witness. Like the Belhar Confession in which the DRMC called the DRC to repent of its heresy of racism, a new confession would call the PCA to repent of the heresies of heterosexism and sexism. Finally, condemning heterosexism and sexism in a new confession is a way for the PC(USA) to bear witness to the gospel in the world today. Instead of building the life of the church and world upon an oppressive anthropology which excludes those who do not conform to a narrow understandings of what it means to be human, the PC(USA) would articulate an inclusive anthropology which recognizes and celebrates each person as a child of God made in God’s image.

observes, “When more conservative Christians invoke ‘biblical marriage,’ they are referring to the Golden Age of Marriage as the ideal. In their minds, they’re citing Adam and Eve, and maybe the passage in one of Paul’s letters on wives submitting to their husbands, and maybe the intention of procreation. Yet there’s no clear definition of ‘biblical marriage.’”¹⁷⁶ Abraham and Sarah’s marriage included the messy relationship with Hagar. Jacob is married to Leah and Rachel, and also has children by their maids Bilhah and Zilpah. Solomon had hundreds of wives. There is not one biblical image of marriage, yet conservative Christians continue to use the language of “biblical marriage” in defense of heteronormativity.

The focus of conservative Evangelical churches on sexuality is striking not only in that there is not a single, clear biblical image of marriage, but also because sexuality was not a primary concern of the authors of Scripture. According to Tonstad, “Despite extensive biblical concern with what should be eaten, in what way, and with whom (a far greater proportion of the biblical text deals with food than with sex), Christians tend to see food practices as ‘matters that can safely be left either to individual choice or respectful dialogue.’ While many think sexuality is at the heart of Christian identity and faithfulness.”¹⁷⁷ Paul made occasional comments about marriage and gendered behavior, but they were far from what he understood to be the heart of the gospel. In the early church theologians and church leaders mostly believed that gender and sexuality were necessary for the producing enough people to fill heaven rather than central to what it means to be human like we do today. In the Old Testament, we find in Leviticus a concern about maintaining boundaries between pure and impure. The same principle of purity regarding homosexual relationships is used for mixing cotton and linen. Tonstad notes: “The

¹⁷⁶ Mihee Kim-Kort, *Outside the Lines: How Embracing Queerness Will Transform Your Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 94.

¹⁷⁷ Tonstad, 36-7.

same general principle regarding the importance of purity and the threat of pollution underlies both worries; thus if one is disregarded, the other may be also.”¹⁷⁸ Human sexuality is far from the heart of the gospel. What is central is welcoming the poor, the outcasts, and the marginalized into the community of faith.

This welcome is often denied to the LGBTQIA+ community as they are often further cast out and marginalized by the church. Womanist theologian and expert on sexuality and the black church Kelly Brown Douglas notes that LGBTQIA+ people are seen as “not worthy of the rights and respect” given to others in the church.¹⁷⁹ As society and churches have embraced heteronormativity, those who have not conformed have been treated as less than fully human.

In the PC(USA), the denial of human rights to LGBTQIA+ people was declared inconsistent with the Christian faith in 1978.¹⁸⁰ It was not until 2011 though that the PC(USA) changed its polity to allow the ordination of LGBTQIA+ persons following decades of debate within the church, including multiple attempts to change the ordination standards. Four years later the *Book of Order* was further amended to allow same-sex marriages by defining marriage as “between two people.”¹⁸¹ “But even with affirming church policy, people in the queer community still face challenges in the PC(USA), which has a long history of exclusion, and full inclusion remains elusive.”¹⁸² The harsh reality for us in the PC(USA) is that while our polity is more inclusive and we have issued numerous statements welcoming and affirming LGBTQIA+

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁷⁹ Kelly Brown Douglas, “Black and Blues: God-Talk/Body-Talk for the Black Church,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 114.

¹⁸⁰ *Religious Freedom Without Discrimination*, by the 223rd General Assembly (2018) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (Louisville: General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2018), 1.

¹⁸¹ *The Book of Order*, W-4.0601, 106.

¹⁸² “LGBTQIA+ leaders in PC(USA) reflect on coming out, history and the church,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, last modified October 11, 2021. <https://pres-outlook.org/2021/10/lgbtqia-leaders-in-pcusa-reflect-on-coming-out-history-and-the-church/>.

persons, that does not mean that the culture of the church has changed. Bertram Johnson, the first openly gay African American to be ordained in the PC(USA) states: “Our theology, our churches, and resources have been used as tools to negate, exclude, and strip queer people of their rightful and sacred place in the family of God. It is the responsibility of the PC(USA) and all its worshiping bodies to repent and seek repair for the wrongs we have done, the lies we have supported, and spirits we have broken.”¹⁸³ He continues: “I don’t know any LGBTQIA+ person in our denomination who has had a smooth or easy road with the Church. We have all suffered in some fashion. The fact that we still have to question if an individual congregation or church leader will genuinely welcome and affirm our gifts is a sign that our legacy of exclusion and sin is still with us.”¹⁸⁴ While progress has been made to include LGBTQIA+ individuals and the community into the life of the church over the last decade, much work remains. Congregations and the denomination are quick to speak words of affirmation and welcome yet our actions have not lived up to our words.

While the PC(USA) has changed its polity to be more inclusive and welcoming to LGBTQIA+ people, it has not changed its official theology in the *Book of Confessions*. According to the official theology of the PC(USA) marriage is defined as between one man and one woman.¹⁸⁵ As the PC(USA) continues to grow into its identity as welcoming and inclusive denomination, a change to the language about human sexuality is needed in its creeds and confessions. This shift in language should not only be about inclusive language for God and the recognition of LGBTQIA+ relationships and ordination, but the explicit condemnation of

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ In the *Book of Confessions*, marriage is defined as between a man and woman in the Second Helvetic Confession (5.246), The Westminster Confession of Faith (6.137), and the Confession of 1967 (9.47). Jack Rogers, the Moderator of the 213th General Assembly (2001) writes: “The Confessions reflect the culture of the sixteenth and seventeenth century regarding the role of women and the purpose of marriage.” Rogers, *Reading the Bible and the Confessions*, 85.

heterosexism. As CBMW and the PCA make exclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons from the life of the church central to their identity, the PC(USA) is called to boldly proclaim that all people, of all races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations, are created in the image of God, loved by God, and recipients of God's grace.

Sexism

For the past few years, the issues of racism and heterosexism have dominated discussions within the PC(USA), reducing attention on sexism. Yet sexism continues to persist in dehumanizing women both in society and in the church. Reformed feminist theologian Mary McClintock Fulkerson observes: "women have been viewed by much of the Christian tradition, Reformed and otherwise, as lesser bearers of the image."¹⁸⁶ Within church and society, women are viewed by patriarchal structures and prejudices as inherently inferior to men, as lacking full humanity. Women's contributions, to society, the church, and families, is often valued less than the contribution of men. According to Reformed feminist theologian Lynn Japinga:

Women have been valued as wives and mothers and unpaid church workers, but for much of its history the Reformed tradition has assumed that they are not fully capable of intellectual work or positions of authority in the church. Various reasons have been given including Scripture, tradition, custom, and comfort. Many refuse to recognize women as fully human and made in the image of God. They will grant women spiritual equality before God but not actual equality in the church.¹⁸⁷

This undervaluing of women is abundantly clear when we look at the gender pay gap between men and women. According to the Pew Research Center, "In 2020, women earned 84% of what

¹⁸⁶ Fulkerson, 96.

¹⁸⁷ Lynn Japinga, "Fear in the Reformed Tradition," in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 8-9.

men earned.”¹⁸⁸ This pay gap exists not only in secular companies but also in the church. The Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is responsible for providing benefits including health care and retirement for the denomination. In its 2020 report “Living by the Gospel,” the Board of Pensions articulates on behalf of the denomination the importance of equal pay and just compensation, but also publishes the data documenting the pay gap within the PC(USA). According to the Board of Pensions, male ministers in the denomination make on average nearly \$10,000 more per year than their female colleagues.¹⁸⁹ While we in the PC(USA) proclaim that we value women and men equally, the concrete data shows that this is not actually the case. Patriarchy continues to subordinate women in a denomination which views itself as anti-patriarchal.

Patriarchy is entrenched within the church. Feminist theologian Dawn DeVries notes: “As cultural goods produced almost exclusively by men, Scripture, creeds, dogmatic canons, and confessions are all saturated with the assumptions and the values of patriarchy.”¹⁹⁰ As the church works to articulate an understanding of the full humanity of women, these sources of the faith need to be reinterpreted. An important first step in this reinterpretation of the tradition is an honest and open assessment of the tradition. Fulkerson reminds us that “formative events of the Reformed tradition – the policies of Geneva, the tirades of John Knox, Calvinist scholasticism, the North American modernist controversies at the turn of the century, and the long-standing refusal to ordain women – render women invisible when they are not offering denigrating images

¹⁸⁸ Amanda Barroso and Anna Brown, “Gender pay gap in U.S. held steady in 2020,” Pew Research Center. Last modified May 25, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/05/25/gender-pay-gap-facts/>.

¹⁸⁹ *Living by the Gospel*, by the Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (Philadelphia: The Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2020), 20.

¹⁹⁰ Dawn DeVries, “Ever to be Reformed According to the Word of God: Can the Scripture Principle Be Redeemed for Feminist Theology?” in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 41.

of them.”¹⁹¹ In PC(USA) congregations we like to talk about the constructive contributions of our tradition to faith and not deal with the harmful and destructive components.

For most of the history of the Reformed tradition, women have been pushed to the periphery, ignored, or demonized. In the documents of the *Book of Confessions*, all but the Belhar Confession and the Brief Statement of Faith, both written in the 1980s, use exclusively male language for God and humanity. The Belhar Confession utilizes gender-neutral language for God and humanity while the Brief Statement of Faith uses male, female, and neutral language. Yet thirty years since the inclusion of the Brief Statement of Faith in the *Book of Confessions* and the default within the local church continues to be using male language for God. Womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland writes, the “overlay of patriarchal power onto God tends to reify male power in our culture, to shore up the status quo, while threatening to undermine women’s agency.”¹⁹² Through the use of male language for God, patriarchy continues to reinforce the teaching that men are closer to God than women, and therefore men are inherently superior. The use of male language for God also perpetuates a false, idolatrous notion that God is male. Going back to John Calvin, the Reformed tradition has been exceptionally critical of all forms of idolatry. Yet, within this tradition the idolatry of a male God has been adopted and promoted.

The church has subordinated women by not only associating male with God, but also female with evil. Women are blamed for the existence of sin because of Eve’s perceived role in original sin in Genesis 3.¹⁹³ Women are not only imagined as inferior to men but as inherently

¹⁹¹ Fulkerson, 97.

¹⁹² Kalbryn A. McLean, “Calvin and the Personal Politics of Providence,” in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 113.

¹⁹³ M. Shawn Copeland, “Body, Representation, and Black Religious Discourse,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 109.

evil according to this pervasive interpretation of Scripture. This perceived responsibility for sin has been used to justify the suppression of women throughout the history of the church. As feminism began to gain greater traction in the 1960s and 1970s, conservative evangelicals responded by reasserting patriarchy as essential to the Christian faith and society. CBMW took the lead in working “to promote patriarchal authority as a nonnegotiable requirement of the orthodox Christian faith.”¹⁹⁴ This conservative emphasis on patriarchy was rooted in the interpretation of Scripture that women are inherently inferior to men, particularly morally inferior.

Patriarchal church structures have used Scripture to justify the exclusion of women from leadership roles in the church. Particularly prominent is the reference to 1 Timothy 2:12 in which Paul forbids women to have any authority over men. This verse has been used to prevent women from holding leadership positions both in the church and in society.¹⁹⁵ Many mainline Protestant denominations have rejected the exclusion of women from ministry on the basis of 1 Timothy 2:12 seeing Paul’s sexism as rooted in his context and culture rather than a core component of the gospel. Reformed, feminist theologian Amy Plantinga Pauw notes: “While many (but not all) Reformed denominations now ordain women to the three offices of deacon, elder, and minister, genuine partnership between men and women in ministry remains elusive.”¹⁹⁶ Changes to ordination eligibility does not negate the underlying prejudices of the church. Despite ordaining women to serve the church as ministers since 1958, nearly 65% of PC(USA) ministers are

¹⁹⁴ Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright Publishing Company, 2020), 168.

¹⁹⁵ Historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez notes that part of the conservative opposition to Hillary Clinton’s candidacy for President of the United States was because she is a woman. See: Du Mez, 251.

¹⁹⁶ Amy Plantinga Pauw, “The Graced Infirmity of the Church,” in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 193.

men.¹⁹⁷ According to Letty Russell, “Even today, with ever increasing numbers of talented and gracious women in church leadership, the question of where they fit into the male-dominated hierarchy of the church is ever with us.”¹⁹⁸ As a denomination that prides itself on the role that women play in the life of the church, it is necessary for us to acknowledge and address the pervasive sexism at work in our congregations, presbyteries, and denomination.

When the Brief Statement of Faith was written the original plan was for there to be an accompanying catechism which would flesh out the theological claims put forth in the Brief Statement. The development of this catechism was seen as especially important for the church’s understanding of the role of women in the life of the church. The Brief Statement includes the line that the Holy Spirit “calls women and men to all ministries of the Church” but the expectation was that the catechism would expand upon this line to counter the sexism pervasive in the other creeds and confessions in the *Book of Confessions*.¹⁹⁹ Unfortunately this catechism was never developed, and the General Assembly was content to adopt the Brief Statement of Faith. The writing of a new confessional statement by the PC(USA) would allow it to complete this piece of unfinished business from its last confessional statement.

A new confession would not only counter the historical sexism practiced in the church, but also directly confront the pervasive sexism in the contemporary church and society. And not just sexism, but also racism and heterosexism which all work to deny the *imago Dei* in many people. “The challenge is to refuse dehumanization and affirm and value the gifts women [people of color, and LGBTQIA+ persons] bring to society and to the church.”²⁰⁰ For centuries

¹⁹⁷ *Living by the Gospel*, 20.

¹⁹⁸ Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality: God’s Welcome in a World of Difference*, ed. J. Shannon Clarkson and Kate M. Ott (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 4.

¹⁹⁹ “A Brief Statement of Faith,” 11.4, 312.

²⁰⁰ Emile M. Townes, “Ethics as an Art of Doing the Work Our Souls Must Have,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Towns, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 41.

the church has made an idol out of white, straight, cis men, making them the model for how we understand God and humanity. This idolatrous notion of God and humanity dehumanizes the majority of people in the world and limits our understanding of God. A new confessional statement with an inclusive anthropology in the PC(USA) can be another step the church takes in correcting these historical and contemporary heresies.

Christian Nationalism

The fourth contemporary heresy which the PC(USA) is called to address today is Christian nationalism. Christian nationalism sees America as defined by Christianity and should be governed according to a Christian vision. It is a different sort of heresy than racism, heterosexism, and sexism which fundamentally deny the humanity of others. Rather, Christian nationalism is a form of idolatry, elevating national allegiance to the level of allegiance to God. Sociologists Samuel Perry, Joshua Grubbs, and Andrew Whitehead define Christian nationalism as “an ideology that views (culturally conservative) Americans as God’s chosen – and possibly protected – people.”²⁰¹ For Christian nationalists, Israel has been replaced by the United States as God’s chosen nation.

Christian nationalism is rooted in drawing parallels between the United States and Israel of the Old Testament which was commanded to maintain cultural and ethnic purity through war, conquest, and separatism.²⁰² Following the victory in the World War Two and the emergence of

²⁰¹ Samuel L. Perry, Joshua B. Grubbs, and Andrew L. Whitehead, “Culture Wars and COVID-19 Conduct: Christian Nationalism, Religiosity, and Americans’ Behavior During the Coronavirus Pandemic,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 59, no. 3 (September 2020): 413.

²⁰² Andrew L. Whitehead, Samuel L. Perry, and Joseph O. Baker, “Make American Christian Again: Christian Nationalism and Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election,” *Sociology of Religion* 79, no. 2 (Sum 2018): 150. The Black church has also relied extensively on drawing parallels with Israel but in a significantly different manner. The Black church identifies itself with Israel through their shared experiences of slavery and liberation. Unlike Christian nationalists who see their chosen status as the new Israel as a justification to oppress others, the Black church has viewed its chosen status as a sign to the world that God liberates the oppressed.

the United States from its generations of isolationism conservative Christians articulated the belief that God had chosen the United States for a great purpose.²⁰³ This status as a chosen nation is seen as setting the United States apart from other nations. Church historian Diana Butler Bass observes: “Throughout history, identifying one’s homeland as God’s formed the basis for Christendom, the earthly reign of the church. The confusion started with the Emperor Constantine in 313 and, in Europe and America, continued well into our times.”²⁰⁴ The language of the United States being God’s “chosen nation” or the “new Israel” has given Americans biblical permission to do as we please, seeing ourselves as special and therefore not subject to standards and morals of others. This perception of America’s chosen-ness has been used to justify the genocide of Native Americans, the enslavement of Africans, and the exploitation of natural resources.²⁰⁵ The perceived chosen status of America has also led to the demand that the United States be a Christian nation.

Despite the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment which prohibits the government from having an established religion, commonly understood as the separation between church and state, in the minds of many Christians the United States is a Christian nation. According to Bass, “There may be no established national church, but God himself guides, blesses, and oversees the American experiment, ‘the last great hope of earth.’ In America, the government may not start or sponsor a church, but the nation itself is an embodiment of the will and plan of the biblical God.”²⁰⁶ This notion of the United States as a Christian nation frames American history as being inherently Christian, overlaying the flight of the first European settlers

²⁰³ Aaron Pattillo-Lunt, “‘This World is Not My Home’: Richard Mouw and Christian Nationalism,” *Religions* 8, no. 1 (January 2017): 13.

²⁰⁴ Diana Butler Bass, “Homeland Security?” *The Cottage*. Last modified July 2, 2021. <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/homeland-security>.

²⁰⁵ Diana Butler Bass, *Broken We Kneel: Reflections on Faith and Citizenship*, 2d ed (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2019), 55.

²⁰⁶ Bass, “Homeland Security?”

in North America searching for the freedom to practice their religious beliefs as they sought on the contemporary perception of Europe as anti-Christian. The original European settlers in North America and the founding fathers of the United States are thus seen as establishing America as a Christian nation in opposition to the suppression of atheist Europe. Conservative evangelicals identify America as “firmly Christian, formed with biblical principles in mind.”²⁰⁷ This perception of America as a Christian nation ignores the writings of the founders of the nation who explicitly rejected the idea of a religious identity for the new nation. However, for Christian nationalists “the turn away from originally given social arrangements was simultaneously a turn away from God, from the Bible, from Christianity, and from morality. Behind all of this, of course, was the assumption that in its pristine origins, the nation embodied all of these things.”²⁰⁸ Christian nationalism lifts up an idealized American past, a golden age, to which the nation needs to return in order to thrive. The return of this American golden age is prevented by policies and practices which are deemed by conservative evangelicals as contrary to the will of God articulated in Scripture.

Christian nationalists believe that God has eternally backed the United States, so long as it maintains conservative policies. America’s status as the chosen nation is perceived to be under threat by views and practices of enemies to conservative evangelicalism.²⁰⁹ In 2010, co-founder of the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood Wayne Grudem

published what amounted to a systematic guide to politics; weighing in at over six hundred pages, the book offered an exhaustive guide to the ‘biblical’ view of all things political. Grudem denounced abortion and LGBT rights and defended religious freedom and national sovereignty. Illegal immigration was a problem,

²⁰⁷ Patillo-Lunt, 2.

²⁰⁸ Mark J. Thomas, “The Resurgence of Religious Nationalism,” *Encounter* 47, no. 2 (Spr 1986): 130.

²⁰⁹ In his 2016 article “The Rise and Fall (and Rise?) of Christian Nationalism” in the *Christian Century*, David Briggs notes: “When religious groups feel directly threatened, there can be an inclination to close ranks against outsiders.” See David Briggs, “The Rise and Fall (and Rise?) of Christian Nationalism,” *The Christian Century* 133, no. 26 (December 21, 2016): 16.

but so were the ‘too many’ legal immigrants who didn’t seem to be assimilating. He recommended immediately and effectively closing the borders, especially the border with Mexico. For Grudem, loving one’s neighbors meant going to war to protect them from ‘evil aggressors.’²¹⁰

Grudem articulates the perceived threats to Christian nationalism focusing on feminism, abortion, LGBTQIA+ rights, and foreigners. This list of perceived threats echoes the threats nationalist German theologians saw in the 1920s and 1930s leading to their support of National Socialism.²¹¹ Christian nationalism is not unique to the United States but has found expressions in other nations such as Hungary and Brazil, and in different times such as Nazi Germany. These different variants of Christian nationalism share a sense of Christianity being under threat in their nation, particularly from unwelcome “outsiders” such as women, immigrants, the LGBTQIA+ community, and refugees. The biblical injunctions to care for these marginalized and oppressed groups are subordinated to prejudice and discrimination.²¹²

The Christian Right perceives the emancipation of women, “abortion, secular education, the rash of crime, contemporary music, degenerate public entertainment” and homosexuality as threats to Christianity and the nation.²¹³ These are seen as contrary to the teachings of Scripture and therefore immoral. For Christian nationalists, the decline in American prestige and power is the result of the nation’s moral decline and sin. God is understood as punishing the United States for deviating from biblical norms, similar to how God punished ancient Israel with the Babylonian exile. Theologian and biblical scholar N.T. Wright counters this narrative of punishment when he writes: “when Israel was enslaved in Egypt *nobody ever said it was a result*

²¹⁰ Du Mez, 239-40.

²¹¹ Björn Krondorfer, “A Pure, Unified People: Paul Althaus in 1933 and Franklin Graham Today,” *The Christian Century* 137, no. 23 (November 4, 2020): 12.

²¹² Eunike Jonathan, “The Influence of Religious Fundamentalism, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, and Christian Orthodoxy on Explicit and Implicit Measures of Attitudes toward Homosexuals,” *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 18, no. 14 (October 2008): 317.

²¹³ Thomas, 134-5.

of their sin.”²¹⁴ Christian nationalists reject Wright’s interpretation of Scripture, turning instead to retribution theology of the Old Testament which promises punishment for several generations for the sins of the nation.

In order to prevent this punishment from being administered to the United States as God’s chosen nation Christian nationalists have worked to install Christian leaders into government offices who share their opposition to the threats of feminism, abortion, gay marriage, and immigration. What Christian nationalists are seeking is theocracy, the governance by officials who are divinely guided. They want to create a godly society according to their narrow definition of godly. In order to achieve this theocracy Christian nationalists have formed a political alliance with the Republican Party, joining in their opposition to secularism and progressivism.²¹⁵

The Christian nationalist theocracy has a decidedly authoritarian impulse. Because this theocracy is divinely guided, there can be no room for compromise. Citing particular passages of Scripture to justify their policies and being inspired and guided by God, any sort of compromise is seen as not only compromising on a particular policy, but the very gospel of Christianity. This leaves no room for negotiation in governance and political opponents do not simply have a different perspective but are fundamentally threats to the good of the faith and the nation. The authoritarian impulse of Christian nationalism delegitimizes alternative perspectives and proposals by claiming that their way and their leader(s) are the only genuine options for God’s chosen nation.

²¹⁴ N.T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2020), 30.

²¹⁵ Pattillo-Lunt, 2.

Part of the theological development within conservative evangelicalism over the last 50 years is the focus on submission to authority figures. In the church, “To question the pastor was to question God.”²¹⁶ This theology of submission also applies in the family, submitting to the authority of the father/husband, and in politics, submitting to the authority of the recognized political leaders. This theology of submission includes an important carve out when it comes to politics as submission is not required to government leaders when they are not Christian nationalists. The authoritarian impulses of Christian nationalism have played out following the 2020 presidential election where the election of Joe Biden as the 46th president was deemed illegitimate because he does not support the theocratic vision of Christian nationalism.

What is particularly interesting about the rise of Christian nationalism is despite the rhetoric focusing on the Christian nature of the nation, the real focus is on nationalism. Evangelicalism is less a Christian movement than a cultural and political one. According to historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez, “Among evangelicals, high levels of theological illiteracy mean that many ‘evangelicals’ hold views traditionally defined as heresy, calling into question the centrality of theology to evangelicalism generally.”²¹⁷ Political identity and cultural anxieties, anti-intellectualism and ethnic nationalism, resentment and grievances are brought together under the banner of evangelicalism with little connection to the historic faith of Christianity.²¹⁸ For these cultural evangelicals, the “good news” of Christianity includes a commitment to patriarchal authority, gender difference, Christian nationalism, white superiority. Theologian Miroslav Volf observes: “Though explicitly giving ultimate allegiance to the gospel of Jesus

²¹⁶ Du Mez, 290.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 6.

²¹⁸ Peter Wehner, “The Evangelical Church is Breaking Apart: Christians must reclaim Jesus from his church,” The Atlantic. Last modified October 24, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/10/evangelical-trump-christians-politics/620469/>.

Christ, many Christians in fact seem to have an overriding commitment to their respective culture, ethnic group, or nation. In conflict situations, they tend to fight on the side of their groups and are tempted to employ faith as a weapon in the struggle.”²¹⁹ The commitment to a nationalist agenda has overridden faith in the God of Jesus Christ and scripture. In short, conservative evangelicals have created for themselves an idol to give them comfort amidst life’s uncertainty, like Aaron creating the golden calf while Moses was up on Mount Sinai.

Since its start during the Protestant Reformation the Reformed tradition has been especially concerned with idolatry. Christian nationalism has made an idol out of the United States and fundamentally distorted the gospel to fit their cultural and political vision for America. In the 2018 policy statements issued by the General Assembly *Religious Freedom Without Discrimination* and *Honest Patriotism* the church has made it clear that it sees the policies and practices of Christian nationalism as antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ.²²⁰ While these policy statements help shape the decisions of the church, they do not have the force of a confession and fall short of condemning Christian nationalism as a heresy. In the Theological Declaration of Barmen the Confessing Church of Germany took a stand against the Christian nationalist forces of its day, condemning forcefully the heresy of elevating particular political leaders and ideologies above God. Today we face a similar struggle in a new context. The church cannot remain silent regarding the idolatry of Christian nationalism but is called to speak clearly and powerfully about what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ and a citizen in our contemporary situation.

²¹⁹ Miroslav Volf, “The Social Meaning of Reconciliation,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 54, no. 2 (2000): 159.

²²⁰ See *Religious Freedom Without Discrimination and Honest Patriotism and Two Shorter Resolutions on Faith and Politics*, by the 223rd General Assembly (2018) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (Louisville: General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2018)

An Inclusive Confession

Racism, heterosexism, sexism, and Christian nationalism are corrupting not only the life of the church, but also contemporary society. According to Boesak, “We have a responsibility for this world for it is God’s world. If this world is threatened by the evils of militarism, materialism, greed, racism, it is very much the concern of the church.”²²¹ If the church is to be faithful to God and the gospel it cannot remain silent. It cannot simply pretend that it has no role in addressing the injustices of the world. We see throughout the gospels how Jesus became human to side with the oppressed and the marginalized. Russell writes, “The oppressed that Jesus has come to set free are the crushed ones: the bruised of society, the nonpersons who have no room to breathe or to live as human beings. God is specially concerned for such people because they have been denied their created humanity by the way the social system in which they live is functioning.”²²² We as the church are called to promote the full humanity of all people, celebrating the diversity of the image of God in our neighbors near and far.

As a church, we are called to confess in both senses of the words. We need to repent of our sinful dehumanization of others. The PC(USA) has started this process of repentance in its *Honest Patriotism* statement which declares: “We have been a country, and we have been a church, which has paid scant attention to the voices of people of color. We have been a country, and we have been a church, which has paid scant attention to the voices of women. We have been a country, and we have been a church which has paid scant attention to the voices of LGBTQ persons.”²²³ This act of repentance and confession starts with acknowledging how we

²²¹ Boesak, 151.

²²² Russell, *Church in the Round*, 81.

²²³ *Honest Patriotism*, 13.

have acted contrary to the will of God but must continue as a process of realigning our practices and beliefs according to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

We are also called to confess in the second sense of the word: publicly articulating the faith of the people of God in this time and place. In his essay “The Desirability and Possibility of a Universal Reformed Creed,” Karl Barth makes the point that the church cannot wait to confess its faith until it is too late and the issues facing the church have changed.²²⁴ The church is called to address the problems and heresies of today, speaking at the outset of the problems which face the world. The writing of a new confessional statement by the PC(USA) is necessary to address the heresies and challenges facing the church and society today.

The use of heresy language for racism, heterosexism, sexism, and Christian nationalism does not mean that with the writing of a new confession the PC(USA) should turn its attention to hunting down heretics and using the disciplinary process of the Book of Order to remove them from the church. Rather, in a new confession the church should explicitly reject these distortions of the gospel and Christian faith and then turn its focus to articulating a constructive and inclusive anthropology. We see within both the Theological Declaration of Barmen and the Belhar Confession the church offering its interpretations of sin and the church in opposition to the contemporary heresies.²²⁵ The arguments in both are structured by positively stating what the church believes followed by rejections of the contemporary false teachings. In arguing for the need for a new confession with an inclusive anthropology and missional ecclesiology I have focused in this section on what the church is called to reject, but in the actual writing of the confession the focus should be on what the church believes.

²²⁴ Barth, “The Desirability and Possibility of a Universal Reformed Creed,” 132-3.

²²⁵ This approach was also used in the Reformation period as most of the chapters of the Second Helvetic Confession conclude with a rejection of false teachings in the church, either historically or in the contemporary situation of the Protestant Reformation.

The writing of a new confession with an inclusive anthropology and missional ecclesiology inevitably leads us to returning to the questions of the provisional nature of the confessions and essential tenets from above. In Reformed theology and Presbyterian polity there is the recognition that the church is constantly called to discern how the church speaks internally and to the world. This means that even if the PC(USA) declares racism, heterosexism, sexism, and Christian nationalism today the future church could discern a need to reverse that designation. In our work to correct the errors of the church in previous generations we need to be aware that the church in future generations will be called to correct our own errors. However, the possibility, even likelihood, of errors on our part does not negate our calling to articulate the faith and practice of the church in the world today. The task of writing a new confession is entered humbly, bearing the weight of responsibility of speaking to and for the church.

When it comes to the issue of essential tenets, there could be concern by some within the PC(USA) that the declaration of racism, heterosexism, sexism, and Christian nationalism could see the church return the fight over essential tenets experienced during the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. The essential tenet addressed by condemning these heresies is the fundamental belief that all people are created equally in the image of God. This is not a new essential tenet for the PC(USA) or the Reformed tradition but runs throughout the Reformed creeds and confessions. We read in the Heidelberg Catechism that God created people “good and in his own image” and in the Westminster Confession that God created all people “endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness after his own image.”²²⁶ This is echoed by the Confession of 1967 when it affirms that the world and all people are created by God out of love.²²⁷ These themes are picked up and expanded in both the Belhar Confession and the Brief

²²⁶ See “The Heidelberg Catechism,” 4.006, 32 and “The Westminster Confession of Faith,” 6.023, 154.

²²⁷ See “The Confession of 1967” 9.16-9.17, 289.

Statement of Faith. In the Belhar Confession, the church rejects any doctrine which “sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and color.”²²⁸ It then continues by affirming that God “wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people.”²²⁹ The PC(USA) in the Brief Statement of Faith describes violating the image of God in others and ourselves as rebellion against God after affirming that God “makes everyone equally in God’s image, male and female, of every race and people.”²³⁰ When discussing Israel as God’s chosen nation, which we have seen has been misappropriated by Christian nationalists, the Brief Statement of Faith proclaims that God chose Israel as a covenant people “to bless all families of the earth.”²³¹ In condemning the heresies of racism, heterosexism, sexism, and Christian nationalism the PC(USA) is not articulating new essential tenets but clarifying and expounding our understanding of the essential tenet that all people are created equally in the image of God in our context.

Still Reforming

Racism, heterosexism, sexism, and Christian nationalism are inconsistent with Reformed theology, distorting not only our understanding of human nature but also our view of God who creates all people in God’s own image. Racism fundamentally denies the full humanity of people of color not only through individual prejudice but through the systems and structures of society. Racism has its roots in the church and persists in the PC(USA) today. Heterosexism operates with a static notion of humanity and claims that the assumptions of conservative Evangelicalism are natural and divinely mandated. The core principles of God’s grace and love are subordinated to heterosexism which draws selectively on Scripture to argue for “Biblical marriage.” Through

²²⁸ “The Belhar Confession,” 10.6, 303.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.7, 304.

²³⁰ “A Brief Statement of Faith,” 11.3, 311.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 11.3, 312.

sexism women have been and continue to be treated as inferior to men by the church. The male language used by the church for God creates an idol of a male god within a tradition that has focused on opposing idolatry. A new inclusive confession would build on the work of the Brief Statement of Faith in developing an understanding of the role of women in the life of the church. Christian nationalism identifies the United States as God's chosen nation and longs to return to an idealized past in order for the nation to thrive. It views opponents of conservative Evangelicalism as threats to the well-being of the state and views compromise as untenable as it is seen as compromising the faith. This rejection of compromise and delegitimizing of alternative views gives Christian nationalism an authoritarian impulse. Christian nationalism places its faith in a nationalist agenda superseding its faith in God, creating an idol of nationalist ideology. An inclusive confession should focus its attention on developing and articulating a constructive and inclusive anthropology which builds on the work of the Belhar Confession and the Brief Statement of Faith. One of the church's essential tenets is already that all people are created equally in the image of God. An inclusive confession would develop this essential tenet further. A new confession with an inclusive anthropology would deepen our understanding of what it means to be human and enrich our knowledge of God.

Chapter 4: A Vision for the Church's Present and Future

The Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck once wrote, “the essence of Christianity was sought especially or exclusively in doctrine.”²³² Writing at the turn of the twentieth century Bavinck looked back at the Reformed tradition since the Protestant Reformation and noticed a focus on doctrine. For Bavinck, this observation carried no sense of judgment but was merely an observation on the history of the Reformed tradition. Over a century later, Bavinck’s observation remains accurate, yet within the church today there is a distinct sense of critical disagreement which accompanies the observation. There is a growing sense amongst church leaders that for far too long the church has focused on what it says rather than on what it does. For these leaders, the writing of a new confession by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a low priority as the church should be focused on mission rather than doctrine. According to Allan Boesak, one of the authors of the Belhar Confession, “action is needed; statements no longer suffice.”²³³ As a theologian and co-author of the Belhar Confession Boesak understands the importance of confessions in the Reformed tradition but is weary of the church making proclamations without taking meaningful action. Boesak rightly calls out the urgent need for the church to act and do the work of the church.

Church historian Diana Butler Bass is likewise critical of the church for focusing its attention on the *what* questions of faith providing answers about God, rather than exploring the *how* questions of living lives of faith in our context.²³⁴ Bass sees the real problem of contemporary Christianity as “thinking that belief is an exam, that there are right or wrong

²³² Herman Bavinck, *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 33.

²³³ Boesak, 49.

²³⁴ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 111-3.

answers.”²³⁵ The church’s focus on doctrine has led to the belief by many faithful church attenders that faith is about believing the right thing rather than following the teachings and examples of Jesus in our daily lives. For many in the church the link between theology and daily living is often obscured. When our theology is not connected concretely with our lives it is reduced to a mere theory about God and the world. It is far too easy to believe the correct things, say the correct things, and live in ways which do not resemble Jesus’ life and teachings. What is needed in the church today is incarnational faith in which the teachings of Jesus are followed and the example of Jesus is practiced.

In response to this focus on doctrine and the separation between belief and practice, there is a movement taking place within the church to focus on the mission of the church. In 2019 the Presbyterian Mission Agency launched the Matthew 25 initiative inviting congregations, presbyteries, and synods to shift their focus outward.²³⁶ It was an invitation to revitalize the church through engaging in mission with our communities. According to pastor and blogger John Pavlovitz, “Sooner or later we need to get out of the laboratory of our theology and get our hands dirty and see if the stuff we’re talking about can work.”²³⁷ For Pavlovitz and others, the world doesn’t need more talking from the church but action.

As a minister and leader in the church, I agree wholeheartedly that the church needs to be more missional and put its faith into action. However, the PC(USA) is not confronted with an either-or decision when it comes to mission and the writing of a new confession. The church is

²³⁵ Diana Butler Bass, *Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence* (New York: HarperOne, 2021), xxiii.

²³⁶ The Presbyterian Mission Agency’s Matthew 25 has three foci: building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, and eradicating systemic poverty. The foci on racism and poverty are intended to push the church beyond benevolence, but to engage communities to transform the systems and structures which perpetuate oppression and marginalization.

²³⁷ John Pavlovitz, *A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community*, expanded edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 107-8.

well equipped to write a new confession while also continuing to focus on living out our faith by making a difference in the world around us. Indeed, a new confession has the ability to support that mission and help give it clarity and direction. A new confession could provide the vision for the church in present as it moves into the future.

We have seen this previously in the church with the adoption of new confessions. Two examples include the Earth Care Congregation program following the adoption of the Brief Statement of Faith and the Matthew 25 and Hands and Feet initiatives following the adoption of the Belhar Confession. In its section on human sin, the Brief Statement of Faith includes the exploitation of nature and threatening “death to the planet entrusted to our care.”²³⁸ This recognition of the harm done by humanity to the world has led the church to start the Earth Care Congregations program which urges the church to work for eco-justice: defending and healing creation while working to assure justice for all of creation and the human beings who live in it. Through the Earth Care Congregations program churches are challenged to not only care for creation, but commune with creation.

In the Belhar Confession the church proclaims that it is called to follow God in bringing justice to the oppressed and bread to the hungry.²³⁹ Following the adoption of the Belhar Confession in 2016, Stated Clerk J. Herbert Nelson, II started the Hands and Feet initiative of the PC(USA) which encourages churches, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly to engage in concrete mission projects in their communities. At the presbytery, synod, and General Assembly levels the Hands and Feet initiative moves these gatherings to be more than simply conducting the business of the church by doing the work of the church in local mission projects. The Matthew 25 initiative of the Presbyterian Mission Agency also builds on the Belhar

²³⁸ “A Brief Statement of Faith,” 11.3, 311.

²³⁹ “The Belhar Confession,” 10.7, 304.

Confession by calling congregations, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly to work on transforming the structures and systems of society which perpetuate oppression, particularly racism and poverty. As the Brief Statement of Faith and the Belhar Confession inspired the Earth Care Congregation program, the Hands and Feet initiative, and the Matthew 25 initiative, a new confession will inspire new, concrete mission programs in the life of the church.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): A Church in Transition

In the Reformed tradition, creeds and confessions have been used to provide vision and direction for the church in periods of transition. During the Protestant Reformation, documents such as the Scots Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Second Helvetic Confession not only sought to define the doctrinal beliefs of the emerging tradition, but to shape the church as it navigated the challenges of the social, political, and religious upheaval of the Reformation. Likewise, the Westminster Standards envisioned a new church structure for the Church of England during the English Civil War, the Theological Declaration of Barmen and the Belhar Confession chartered courses for Christian opposition to the Nazi regime and Apartheid in South Africa, and the Confession of 1967 and the Brief Statement of shaped new denominations as they navigated reunions.

That the church is in a period of transition today is not a point of disagreement for most church leaders. What is up for discussion is what the church is transitioning to. What will the church look like in 5, 10, 15, 20 years? Decades of declining church participation is having a profound impact on the life of local congregations as they struggle to have enough people who give enough money to pay for a minister and the upkeep of the building, let alone the various ministries of the churches. This decline is being felt by congregations and denominations across the country and theological spectrum. Bass observes, “The old argument that liberal churches are

in decline and conservative ones are growing is not true. The denominations that once seemed impervious to decline are beginning to look like most other American religious groups.”²⁴⁰

Shifting the theological orientation of the denomination will not suddenly reverse the years of declining membership of the PC(USA).²⁴¹

The reality is that fewer people today find attending church to be meaningful. According to feminist theologian Lynn Japinga, “questions of why people neither attend nor listen to the church consume much of the church’s energy at this point in its life. Church leaders seem almost desperate to reverse the decline and start to grow again.”²⁴² As the decline of the church becomes increasingly evident, the focus of the church has shifted away from its ministry and mission to trying to solve the problem of decline. Instead of being focused outward missionally, churches are increasingly insular, and the ministers are tasked with growing and protecting the church.²⁴³ According to feminist theologian Letty Russell, “the ministry of service to humankind is the ministry of God in Christ reconciling the world. The church is invited to participate in that ministry. Yet in many churches the minister’s job is perceived to be taking care of the flock, rather than equipping the saints for their service in the world.”²⁴⁴ It is challenging for the church to be a meaningful place for people when is it simply focused on its own survival.

The declining participation in the life of the church was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In March of 2020 the basic ability to gather together as a community was suddenly taken away as the world locked down amid a global pandemic. Churches had to quickly

²⁴⁰ Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 20.

²⁴¹ In his 2006 essay “The Church Is Corrigible,” Presbyterian minister and moderator of the former conservative PC(USA) advocacy group the Presbyterian Coalition Jerry Andrews argues that the PC(USA) should become more conservative and evangelical to reverse the trend of losing members and start growing as a denomination. See: Andrews, 76.

²⁴² Japinga, 15.

²⁴³ Pavlovitz, 28.

²⁴⁴ Russell, *Just Hospitality*, 15.

adapt to virtual ministry by producing worship videos and teaching congregants how to use Zoom. As the lockdowns endured months instead of a few weeks, many people discovered that Jesus is not confined to the church building but was present with them on their couch and around their dining tables. With the explosion of online church content, others found themselves connecting with new congregations around the country and world. Still others discovered just how little the church meant to them. Bass writes, “Many will not go back to church, mostly because they left some time ago. They did not need help to find Jesus in their lives and in the world. They were already discovering what it meant to follow Jesus beyond the church. Perhaps the pandemic hastened the process, caused them to ask new questions, or renewed their courage on the journey.”²⁴⁵ Churches large and small are still grappling with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has not only accelerated the declining participation in churches, but also the move to a greater emphasis on online ministry. For years there has been a gradual move to churches streaming their worship services and utilizing social media for outreach. With the pandemic, these virtual components moved from the periphery of the church’s ministry to the center. Questions which most in the church had never thought about, such as how to celebrate the sacraments virtually, became pressing issues requiring creative interpretations of the tradition.

For at least the last ten years, the church has been in a period of transition. Society, the church, and politics have all experienced great upheaval in the United States even before the pandemic which has shaken the church and society to its core. As the church seeks its way through this transition, a new confession would offer clarity and guidance. It will not suddenly stop the declining participation in churches, but it could inspire churches to rethink how they do

²⁴⁵ Bass, *Freeing Jesus*, 267.

ministry in creative ways. The confessions of the church operate like the rudder of a ship, steering where it will go. A new confession with an inclusive anthropology will steer the church at the national, regional, and local levels to embrace those long marginalized in our communities and world. A new confession with a missional ecclesiology will call the church out of its buildings and into the community and world to make a difference through working for justice, peace, equality, hope, and love for all people. A new confession would also model creativity to the church; showing it how it is possible to do the new thing God is calling us to and emboldening leaders in the church to think creatively about ministry in their own unique contexts. Instead of perpetually grieving the decline of the church, a new confession would help churches discern new opportunities. According to Bass, “We need creative courage to reimagine our traditions and the structures of Christian community. We can awaken to new possibilities, dream new dreams, and create what does not yet exist.”²⁴⁶ A new confession could play an important role in the creative reimagination of the church which is necessary for the church to thrive in the twenty-first century, inspiring the church to adapt to its changing situation. A creed would not only be a new statement about what the church believes, but a vision for who the church is called to be and what it is called to do in this period of transition.

A Missional Confession

Led by the Presbyterian Mission Agency, there is a move by many in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to make the church more missionally focused. This development is based both on the interpretation of Scripture, seeing the church as called to engage the world constructively as the body of Christ, and the decades of declining church participation, seeing mission as an

²⁴⁶ Diana Butler Bass, “8 Theses on The Cottage Door,” The Cottage. Last modified October 15, 2021. <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/8-theses-on-the-cottage-door>.

important way of making the church relevant and appealing to those outside the church.

Regardless of the reason, the church is becoming more mission oriented and a new confession would help clarify the church's identity as a missional denomination.

A new confession would provide the opportunity for the church to articulate a missional ecclesiology. The creeds and confessions currently in the PC(USA) *Book of Confessions* begin their ecclesiology with the nature of the church and then, almost as an afterthought in many of them, articulate what the church is called to do. A missional ecclesiology would build its understanding of the church based on what the church is called to do, on its mission and purpose. Russell offers insight for how a missional theology would start: "the church does not have a mission; rather, it participates in God's Mission in the redemption of humanity and the restoration of all creation."²⁴⁷ By rooting the purpose of the church in God's mission, the new confession would have the platform to clearly articulate the work to which the church is called. Additionally, the mission of the church would not be peripheral in the confession but make it clear that the church is called to act by joining the mission of God.

Joining the mission of God means that the church is called to make a difference in the world. According to Pavlovitz, "we see Christians making little difference in the world or making a difference that feels more like harm."²⁴⁸ A new confession would serve as a call to action, a reminder of our calling to engage the world as the hands and feet of Jesus. As theologian Miroslav Volf puts it, "As sons and daughters of the Old Testament prophets, Christians must make the problems of the larger society their own."²⁴⁹ As church participation has declined, many congregations have focused inward, looking for the church to take care of its

²⁴⁷ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 88.

²⁴⁸ Pavlovitz, 106.

²⁴⁹ Volf, "The Social Meaning of Reconciliation," 162.

members rather than making a difference in the world. The challenges facing the world, ranging from economic inequality to racism to climate change to political polarization and everything in between, all impact the community of faith the church and the people the church is called to love. According to Boesak:

As Reformed Christians we see ourselves as human beings who are responsible for the world in which we find ourselves. It is a world made by us, and we are capable of making it different. More than that: we *should* make it different. It *needs* reform. Furthermore, the exercise of that responsibility is part of the discipleship to which the Lord Jesus Christ has called us. It is not an addition to this discipleship, but an integral part of it. Doing what we can to reform the social world in which we live is part of our spiritual life.²⁵⁰

Drawing into ourselves amidst the challenges of the world is inconsistent with our calling as followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus does not call us to abandon the world to its problems, but to make a difference in the world just as he made a difference in the world through healing the sick and restoring the outcasts to community.

At the heart of the call to make a difference in the world is joining God's work for justice. We see throughout Scripture that God is on the side of the oppressed and marginalized revealing that the call of the church is to transform unjust structures into just ones.²⁵¹ As the community of faith, the church is not simply focused on the well-being of those within it community but drawing on God's vision for all of humanity works for the flourishing of all. Scripture does not afford us the luxury of ignoring the oppression of the poor, the deporting of immigrants, the suffering of women, the destruction of our education and health care systems, and mass incarceration. It teaches us to take responsibility for the well-being of others. As feminist theologian Serene Jones powerfully states: "There's not a page in the entire Bible where

²⁵⁰ Boesak, 89.

²⁵¹ Townes, 44.

you don't hear talk about poverty and the stranger and the outcast and God calling us to be there. It's not a hidden message."²⁵² In seeking the flourishing of all people, we are working for justice.

Many churches do not recognize the work for justice as an act of faith in an unjust world preferring acts of charity to justice. Charity involves us giving of our time and resources to help people in need. It offers short-term assistance to those in need and requires only a short-term commitment from those who give. Charity does nothing to change the structures and systems which trap people in cycles of need but provide temporary relief. Charity is donating clothes or spending an afternoon volunteering at a soup kitchen, both provide temporary assistance without changing the fundamental brokenness which creates the need. Justice, on the other hand, sees the brokenness of the world and attempts to change the underlying structures and systems. Working for justice is a long-term commitment and is usually divisive as it disrupts the comfort of those who benefit from the oppressive structures and systems. Working for justice can be messy while charity is easier and makes us feel good about ourselves.²⁵³ Charity is a good work of the church but the church is called to more than charity, it is called to justice.

In many churches today the mission of the church is reduced to a financial transaction. For example, a hurricane or tornado strike a region and the church gathers money which it sends to others to do the work of helping the devastated communities. Or, to take an example from the community in which I serve, there is a large child poverty problem, so the church collects money to give to the local food bank who in turn provides meals to hungry children. While these are both important causes for the church to support, when benevolent giving becomes the way in which the church accomplishes its ministry and mission something essential is missing. All too often the church outsources its purpose and the world gets divided into donors and recipients.

²⁵² Jones, *Trauma & Grace*, 183.

²⁵³ Connelly, 138.

According to Hunter Farrell, director of the World Mission Initiative at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, “God’s mission is not a ‘help desk’ where the powerful provide goods and services to the needy, but rather a round table where rich and poor, marginalized and privileged, people of different backgrounds and racial, religious and gender identities are invited together, offering their strengths and also their needs.”²⁵⁴ A missional church would move away from the current model of benevolence as mission to embrace joining the mission of God in our actions.

Becoming a missional church also does not mean investing in more short-term mission trips. These are frequently simply Christian tourism which do not significantly impact the host community or increase mission service or giving amongst participants. Further, these short-term mission trips tend to reinforce racial and ethnic prejudices rather than dismantling them.²⁵⁵ Rather, a missional church is one which builds relationships within its community which brings people together for justice, peace, and equality.

At its core, a missional church is focused on loving its neighbors following the teaching and example of Jesus. In Luke 10 a lawyer approaches Jesus with a question: what do I need to do in order to have eternal life? Jesus, the consummate teacher, turns the question back on the lawyer asking what is required by the law. The lawyer responds: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind.”²⁵⁶ Jesus promptly congratulates the lawyer for answering the question correctly and then instructs him to live the answer he provided. In the lawyer’s response in Luke 10 to how the law instructs us to have eternal life, he answers that we are to commit ourselves completely to loving God and adds “and your neighbor as yourself.” When Jesus instructs him to live out this love of

²⁵⁴ B. Hunter Farrell, “Five Hidden Superpowers of Congregational Mission Leaders,” *The Presbyterian Outlook* 204, no. 2 (January 31, 2022): 12.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁵⁶ Luke 10:27, NRSV.

God and neighbor, the lawyer responds with another question: “who is my neighbor?”²⁵⁷ In this follow up question, it seems like the lawyer knows how to love God, after all he had been raised in a devout Jewish household, but the love of the neighbor required more clarification for the lawyer. What follows is Jesus’ well-known Parable of the Good Samaritan in which a man is attacked, robbed, and left for dead on the side of the road. As religious leaders, experts in the law, came across the man, they avoided him and left him on his own. It was a Samaritan, an enemy of the Jewish people, who comes and has compassion on this man. The Samaritan cares for his wounds and pays for his restoration to health. It is this Samaritan, the one who enacts the law rather than simply knowing its words, who loves the neighbor. For Jesus, the law is to be lived, people are to be cared for.

In *Church Dogmatics I/2*, Karl Barth dissects the lawyer’s question and Jesus’ response and looks beyond this passage in Luke 10 to the rest of Scripture seeking to understand our neighbors. Drawing on the parable of the Good Samaritan, Barth describes our neighbor as the one who is our benefactor. Rather than starting by viewing ourselves as the Samaritan, it is only after we understand ourselves as the one who needs assistance that we are able to see ourselves as called to help others. Summoned by Christ, we are summoned to be benefactors as well, to be the neighbor for others. This being a neighbor to others is to be a bearer and representative of divine mercy in the world.²⁵⁸ Then, drawing on Matthew 25, Barth writes, “Jesus Christ is always concealed in the neighbor.”²⁵⁹ As we are helped and give help, we are met not only by our neighbors, but by Christ.

²⁵⁷ Luke 10:27-8, NRSV.

²⁵⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 420-1.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 435.

Love for our neighbors calls us to solidarity with the oppressed, marginalized, and victims of the world to work on their behalf for their flourishing. This can mean fighting against voter identification laws and other voter suppression tactics which disproportionately impact people of color. It can mean ensuring in our churches that women not only have a seat and a voice at the table when decisions are made, but also that they are given the leadership roles and responsibilities they deserve. It can mean going to city council to argue for funds to be set aside for affordable housing. It can mean petitioning elected officials to invest in rehabilitation rather than incarceration for people who suffer from addiction. It can mean holding rallies and marches calling for police reform and the end of police violence. This work for justice and equality can and will take many different forms, but it is our love for our neighbors which undergirds these various efforts.

The missional church seeks justice and equality for all people. According to Russell, “Justice is understood in the Hebrew Testament not as an abstract principle, or rule for conduct, but as a relational concept that describes the way we relate to God and one another. The Hebrew people are a covenant people, and faithfulness to that covenant requires living justly with one another and joining God in the vindication of the poor, the widow, the stranger, and all who are oppressed.”²⁶⁰ God’s vision of justice expressed in Scripture is contradicted by the systems and structures of racism, heterosexism, sexism, poverty, and oppression at work in the world. We are called not only to meet the needs of individuals, but to work to transform these systems.

Because we can envision systems of greater justice, we can work to achieve those visions and systems. Perfect justice may not be achieved, but partial realizations are within our grasp.²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 117.

²⁶¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*, with an introduction by Langdon B. Gilkey (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 81.

The work of the church to strive for a more just society. That is how we love our neighbors in a world corrupted by sin: we work for justice. In each historical situation there are new possibilities for realizing a higher justice. Loving our neighbors is more than care for those in our proximity, it involves working for the advancement of all people. Justice and equality are ways in which we love our neighbors, particularly those who are oppressed and marginalized. The missional church is called into the margins to care for those for those long forgotten and ignored.

Within the Reformed tradition there is a long history of resistance as a way of achieving greater justice. This resistance does not necessitate violence, but through public demonstrations and organization we can resist against the systems and structures of oppression. We see in the Poor People's Campaign, Occupy Wallstreet, #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, and others the active resistance against oppression and exploitation. In our love for our neighbors, we join these protests, join these resistance movements, to bring about a more just state and society.

The work for justice and equality are central, not on the periphery, to the Christian life. South African theologian John De Gruchy writes: "Many traditional theologies deal with justice and liberation as ethical themes arising from theological reflection. They are items on their social witness agenda. But they do not regard engagement in the struggle for justice and liberation as fundamental to their domestic concern or way of doing theology."²⁶² We see in De Gruchy that justice is not something we attach at the end of our theology or beliefs but is a central part of the life of faith. In the life of the church, the struggle for justice in our communities, states, nations, and world is a part of its ongoing ministry of love for our neighbors.

²⁶² De Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology*, 37.

A missional church looks to the example of the early church, particularly the church in Acts 2 following Pentecost, as a guide to its life and ministry. Following Pentecost, the followers of Jesus “were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”²⁶³ What is striking about the life of the early church was their care for one another and their community. They used their resources to help those in need; providing what was needed, not simply what was convenient for the original owners. The early church operated out of a theology of abundance, trusting that God would provide what was needed for the whole community. Many of today’s churches operate with a theology of scarcity, hoarding resources and constantly asking members to give more. A missional church today is one which operates with a theology of abundance, seeing itself as the steward of its resource which are used to meet the needs not only of its members but also its community.

While many churches have written wonderful mission statement proclaiming their intent to make a difference in their community and world, a clearer indication of a congregation’s mission and values is its budget. For most small mainline congregations, the bulk of their annual budget goes to paying staff and maintaining facilities. Beyond that, a small pool of funds is divided between church music, Christian education, and mission. Many small, struggling congregations are fortunate to be able to spend 5% of their annual budget on mission. This raises the glaring concern that leaders within the church need to think creatively about how they do the work of the church in their communities. For many of these churches the most valuable assets, the church buildings, are also their most underutilized. As the missional church discerns how it is called to join God’s ongoing mission in the world, it needs to be open to new possibilities for

²⁶³ Acts 2:44-5, NRSV.

how it uses its space. Food pantries, affordable housing, and tutoring for children are just a few of the possibilities. Each congregation has its own unique set of resources in its own unique context, so each congregation needs to go through the process of discernment to see how they are called to join God's mission in their community.

Jesus invites us to join him in going into the margins of society to share the love and grace of God. Just as Jesus welcomed lepers, prostitutes, and tax collectors, we are called into relationships with the outcasts and marginalized. The majority of the world's population lives in poverty, on the razor thin edge between life and death. Those in poverty are exploited and oppressed by a system which makes them invisible and is indifferent at best to their well-being. According to Jones, "If divine love makes every creature an equal, then everyone who claims to know and love God must commit to stopping this."²⁶⁴ In order for the church to be faithful to its mission and its calling, it must meet the needs of the marginalized and oppressed while also working to transform the systems which perpetuate all forms of oppression. Through the Matthew 25 Initiative the Presbyterian Mission Agency is working to help churches shift their mission from charity to justice and a new missional confession would help the church make this shift.

In addition to justice, a missional confession would focus on hospitality as an important part of joining in God's mission. Hospitality is central to joining God's mission as it "creates a safe and welcoming space for persons to find their own sense of humanity and worth."²⁶⁵ This work of hospitality is closely linked with addressing the heresies of racism, heterosexism, and sexism discussed in the previous chapter. Through hospitality, we recognize and affirm the humanity of other people, welcoming them into community. Hospitality is central to the church's

²⁶⁴ Serene Jones, *Call it Grace: Finding Meaning in a Fractured World* (New York: Viking, 2019), 119.

²⁶⁵ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 173.

work of healing our world in crisis. A renewed focus on hospitality in a new confession is important because “despite all our talk about seeking *all people*, the truth is we religious folk usually favor a far more selective sampling.”²⁶⁶ The church is composed of sinful and broken people who participate in the brokenness of the world. We exclude even as we speak words of inclusion. A missional confession with an emphasis on hospitality would help inspire the church to reach out across differences to build relationships and community with strangers.

One of the ways in which we love our neighbors is through hospitality. We see in the life and ministry of Jesus his welcome for all to join him over meals. The devout, the outcast, the forgotten, the friend, the enemy, all are welcomed by Jesus. Russell describes the church as “a community *where everyone is welcome*, because it gathers around the table of God’s hospitality. Its welcome table is a sign of the coming feast of God’s mended creation, with the guest list derived from the announcements of the jubilee year in ancient Israel.”²⁶⁷ As we are loved by God, we are called to love our neighbors by emulating Jesus’ hospitality by welcoming everyone.

The practice of hospitality provides the important and practical link between the church’s inclusive anthropology and its missional ecclesiology. Russell defines hospitality as “the practice of God’s welcome, embodied in our actions as we reach across difference to participate with God in bringing justice and healing to our world in crisis.”²⁶⁸ Within the church, hospitality is often thought of as simply welcoming those who choose to enter the church building. However, hospitality is also the active welcoming of people in the community. It extends God’s welcome without waiting for others to take the first step. According to Russell, “If we want the church to

²⁶⁶ Pavlovitz, 13.

²⁶⁷ Letty M. Russell, “Why Bother with Church? The Church and Its Worship,” in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William C. Placher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 242.

²⁶⁸ Russell, *Just Hospitality*, 2.

matter in the twenty-first century, we must become a community that practices God's Welcome and hospitality in a world of difference and danger."²⁶⁹ The missional church is active in extending God's welcoming grace, love, mercy, and justice to all people in the community, particularly those who have been excluded by the church.

Within the Reformed tradition the starting point for understanding the nature of the church has been the church as the body of Christ, or the four marks of the church found in the Nicene Creed (one, holy, catholic, and apostolic), or three Reformed marks of the church (the word proclaimed, the sacraments rightly administered, and discipline). For some in the church, a missional ecclesiology which starts with the work and mission of the church and then moves to these topics will be taken as a radical and inappropriate shift in the church's self-understanding. A missional confession, though, would not abandon these historical understandings of the church but reinterpret them according to the church's calling to join in God's mission. According to Russell, "Many creeds have been written since the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, and they have responded to the needs of the churches in their own times. In our time there needs to be an added emphasis on the justice connection that would make all the other talk about signs more authentic."²⁷⁰ A missional confession's ecclesiology would bring fresh light and appreciation to the traditional marks of the church while simultaneously bringing the missional purpose of the church into greater focus. According to Samuel Son, the Presbyterian Mission Agency's manager for Diversity and Reconciliation, "The Reformation lifted gospel preaching and administration of sacraments (Calvin added discipline of the church) as marks of the true church in order to

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 115.

²⁷⁰ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 135.

recognize church work independent of a 1,000-year-long hierarchy of papal authority. It was a bold move. We need an equally bold move today.”²⁷¹

The call for the church to focus more on its mission in the world is correctly working to transform the church from being internally and doctrinally focused into a church which makes a difference in the world. However, this missional focus does not negate the importance of a new confession. The PC(USA) is perfectly capable of engaging in mission and confession writing at the same time. Should the General Assembly approve the writing of a new confession, this task would fall to a small group of 15 to 20 individuals selected by the next co-moderators of the General Assembly in consultation with the General Assembly Nominating Committee and the current Stated Clerk, the Reverend Doctor J. Herbert Nelson, II. The writing of a new confession would not take the work of the entire denomination, allowing congregations, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly to continue its missional work while this dedicated group labors to articulate the faith of the church in a way that speaks powerfully to the contemporary American context. In fact, the writing of a new confession would enhance the mission of the church as retired minister Daniel Meeter observes: “It has often been argued that our doctrinal standards lack a sense of mission.”²⁷² For those seeking a greater emphasis on the mission work of the church, a new confession presents a unique opportunity for the church to articulate its missional calling in the theological foundations of the denomination.

Each of the creeds and confessions included in the *Book of Confessions* was written to address its own unique context. While we continue to be guided and inspired by them today, they

²⁷¹ Samuel Son, “The Gospel and Inclusivity,” Presbyterian Mission Agency. Last modified April 5, 2021. https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/the-gospel-and-inclusivity/?fbclid=IwAR31E8zG_3Spt8d67E9CC4Uk52hcqfmcoVCi_ikMKOk7V9wP2uITnTgqitI.

²⁷² Daniel Meeter, Twenty-Seven Years with the Belhar Confession. Last modified June 1, 2011. <https://reformedjournal.com/twenty-seven-years-with-the-belhar-confession/>.

were not written for the church several hundred years in the future for them. They could not imagine the challenges facing the world today so did not articulate a theological understanding of climate change, or virtual and hybrid churches. The theology of previous creeds and confessions are all wrapped in their cultural and historical prejudices, intertwined with their social, political, and economic realities.²⁷³ A new confession would likewise reflect our own perspectives and limitations, but would speak to the current situation of the church and world. According to feminist and queer theologian Linn Marie Tonstad, “Theology is *art*, representation. It’s a way of organizing reality, both to reflect and change it.”²⁷⁴ A new confession would not only articulate the doctrines of the church today, but would shape how the church sees the world, how the church engages with the world, how the church is called to transform the world. Volf writes, “theologians should concentrate less on social arrangements and more on *fostering the kind of social agents capable of envisioning and creating just, truthful, and peaceful societies, and on shaping a cultural climate in which such agents will thrive.*”²⁷⁵ A new confession, a missional confession, is necessary for the PC(USA) to articulate a clear vision for the church’s present and future.

Still Reforming

A new confession with a missional ecclesiology will guide and inspire the church as it joins the mission of God in the world. We have seen this before with the adoption of the Brief Statement of Faith and the Belhar Confession inspiring the Earth Care Congregations program, the Hands and Feet initiative, and the Matthew 25 initiative. A new missional confession would offer clarity and guidance to the church in transition amidst declining membership and

²⁷³ See: Bass, *Freeing Jesus*, 198 and Tonstad, 75.

²⁷⁴ Tonstad, 74.

²⁷⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 21.

participation, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the expansion of virtual ministry. It would spark imagination and creativity while helping the church focus on its mission and ministry. A new missional confession would be a call to action for the church to join the mission of God in the world by working for justice and equality. The ministry of hospitality connects the inclusive anthropology of the new confession with its missional ecclesiology.

Chapter 5: The Value of Unity

With news that the Reformed Church of America (RCA) is splitting, the expectation that the United Methodist Church will fracture into multiple denominations at its next General Conference, and the memories of congregations leaving the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) a decade ago following changes in the polity to make the church more inclusive of the LGBTQIA+ community, perhaps the greatest objection to the writing of a new confession is the fear that it will cause further division in the church and prompt more congregations to leave the denomination. Drawing on Scripture, tradition, and polity, opponents of a new confession argue the unity of the church should not be threatened by the writing of a potentially divisive new confession. These opponents draw on passages from Scripture such as 1 Corinthians 1:10 in which Paul writes: “Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose.”²⁷⁶ When it comes to tradition, they point particularly to the Nicene Creed which describes the church as “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.”²⁷⁷ The denomination’s polity explicitly draws on Scripture and the Nicene Creed when in the opening sections of *The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity the Book of Order* declares: “Division into different denominations obscures but does not destroy unity in Christ. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), affirming its historical continuity with the whole Church of Jesus Christ, is committed to the reduction of that obscurity, and is willing to seek and to deepen communion with all other churches within the one holy catholic and apostolic

²⁷⁶ 1 Cor. 1:10, NRSV.

²⁷⁷ “The Nicene Creed,” *Book of Confessions*, 1.3, 3.

Church.”²⁷⁸ Passages such as these from Scripture and the church’s tradition and polity are used to emphasize the importance of church unity.

What is interesting about this line of argument is that it assumes that a new confession will be divisive before a committee can even be formed or a single word is written. The writing of a new confession would by necessity need to include a statement about human sexuality, a topic which has divided the church for decades. However, it is important to remember that the writing of a new confession is a lengthy endeavor. Should the General Assembly approve forming a committee to write a new confession, it would likely take six to eight years for the committee to present the new confession to the denomination for consideration. From there it would take another four years before the new confession became a part of the *Book of Confessions* if everything goes smoothly and the confession is approved. This lengthy process would require the work of multiple committees and broad support from the denomination. Additionally, by the time the new confession is included in the *Book of Confessions* at least two decades will have passed since the PC(USA) changed its polity to be more inclusive of the LGBTQIA+ community. While a new confession could certainly spark theological disagreements within the denomination, to assume that it will be written in such a way as to divide the denomination is disingenuous.

There is a second assumption at work in this argument against writing a new confession: that unity is always a positive force in the life of the church. This positive narrative of church unity told by opponents of a new confession ignores how the demand for church unity has been used to perpetuate oppression and for those in positions of authority to maintain their power. It operates with the starting point of the unity of the church and fails to acknowledge the ways in

²⁷⁸ *Book of Order* F-1.0302a, 3.

which the church is already broken and divided. If we want to talk about church unity as it relates to the writing of a new confession it is necessary to study the harm done in the name of church unity and then explore how a new confession could contribute to the church's unity and identity.

The Harm of Unity

In the congregation I am currently serving, a group of leaders recently worked with the local homeless resource center to explore how our congregation could make a difference in the community. They looked at the volunteers we have in the congregation along with the church's financial and property resources in assessing what we could do and studied the community to discover the greatest needs. They quickly learned of the lack of homeless shelters in the community and the desperate need for transitional housing, especially for homeless families. This group, working with the homeless resource center and an architect, put together a plan to completely renovate the church's Heritage Hall, a 1,200 square foot facility that has never been fully utilized by the church, into transitional housing for homeless families. The project is called the Bridge to Home and would be a partnership with the homeless resource center and the city of Jonesboro and funded through public and private grants.

When the Bridge to Home was presented to the Session and the congregation there was enthusiastic support from many, but a vocal minority opposed the project. This minority raised a myriad of arguments against the project including the all too familiar "This is not how we have always done things" argument. Seeing their various objections to the project fail to sway those in favor, the opponents of the Bridge to Home argued that this project threatened the unity of the church. The church should not pursue such a project when it causes such strong divides in the life of the church.

Using unity as the reason for opposing change is hardly unique to the congregation I am currently serving. I have witnessed the same tactics used in various congregations, in presbyteries, and at the General Assembly. It is also not a distinctly Presbyterian approach either as I have heard the same story with different details from ministry colleagues from numerous denominations. Changes, even those that are necessary for the good of the church, are seen as a threat to the church. Church historian Diana Butler Bass observes: “If the defenders of the old system elevate anxiety to a fever pitch, they can actually block the growth of consensus and prevent necessary change from occurring.”²⁷⁹ Fear of alienating some people in the church, particularly influential people in the church, weaponizes unity against change in the church. Jack Haberer, a retired PC(USA) minister and former editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, provides a classic example of weaponizing unity when he writes: “given Jesus’ prayer for unity, one may generally surmise that any movement toward unity is probably a movement in the direction God would have us go, and movement toward yet another schism is probably movement contrary to where God would have us go.”²⁸⁰ Haberer wrote this in 2006 during the PC(USA)’s lengthy fight over the inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community. He articulates that those who are fighting for change in the denomination are leading the church to schism. For Haberer and others, those calling for change are responsible for the break of unity; they are responsible for the division of the church.

The fear of division is felt particularly keenly in congregations and denominations with declining membership. The fear is that the departure of a few members will quickly become a trend, leaving the congregation with fewer volunteers, less money, and a wounded identity. For

²⁷⁹ Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 227.

²⁸⁰ Jack Haberer, “Rediscovering the Reformed, Being Reformed Church,” in *Presbyterian Being Reformed: Reflections on What the Church Needs Today*, ed. Robert H. Bullock Jr. (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2006), 40.

Robert H. Bullock Jr., the former Director of Mission Communications for the General Assembly Council of the PC(USA), “Given the increasing splintering of the Christian church, the burden lies with any who would cause yet another schism.”²⁸¹ Conflict, at the local, regional, and national church levels, is to be avoided. This approach, however, fails to recognize that conflict is often necessary in the life of the church. When we look at the example of Jesus in the gospels, he was constantly engaged in conflict with the religious leaders of his day. As they sought to narrowly control who had access to God through the temple and synagogues Jesus focused his ministry on those who had been excluded from the faith. Jesus worked to expand who was included as children of God and the church is called to continue that work. For minister and author John Pavlovitz this calling will always involve conflict. He writes, “To expand the table *is* to welcome trouble, it is to invite conflict.”²⁸² Conflict is not inherently contrary to the life of the church, the church’s identity has been shaped through conflicts.

Through the ages, the church has been forced to forge its identity through conflict and crisis. When we look back at the early church, we see deep divides in the church over how to understand the person and work of Jesus Christ. While Arius understood Jesus Christ to be the first-born of creation, Athanasius argued that Jesus Christ was not created by God but was and is God. Following the Council of Nicaea, church theologians were divided over whether to emphasize the humanity or the divinity of Jesus Christ. In the face of these disagreements, councils of the church gathered and wrote creeds and confessions articulating the faith of the church. There was no guarantee that these creeds and confessions would unite the church, but the

²⁸¹ Robert H. Bullock, Jr., “Toward a New Presbyterian Church for a New Century,” in *Presbyterian Being Reformed: Reflections on What the Church Needs Today*, ed. Robert H. Bullock Jr. (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2006), xx.

²⁸² Pavlovitz, 177-8.

church also had to discern its path and identity through these times of crisis. Just as for the church in the fourth century, “heresy must be opposed at the risk of schism.”²⁸³

The act of writing a creed or confession involves conflict. A creed or confession is a statement of belief for the church; through it the church declares who it is. A part of this statement of identity and belief is a rejection of false theological understandings. This rejection is often understood to be divisive on the part of those issuing the creed or confession. Yet the plea of the confessors “is not to create disharmony or division. On the contrary, they recognize that disharmony and division already exist because of the presence of an ‘alien gospel’ that undermines the church’s unity. Their plea is that the churches embrace its one source of hope and promise in Jesus the Christ.”²⁸⁴ The goal of writing a new confession is not to divide the church, but to unite it amidst its ongoing divisions.

We cannot pretend that the division of the church starts with the call for the writing of a new confession. The church is already divided; indeed, we can trace divisions within the church back to the New Testament with the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 where leaders of the early church disagreed about whether or not Gentile followers of Jesus Christ needed to become Jewish through circumcision in order to be included in the community of faith. The early church was able to work through that disagreement, yet others continually arise in the church. In Matthew 18:20 Jesus promises that wherever two or three are gathered in his name he would be present with them. The history of the church also shows that wherever two or three are gathered there will be disagreement. The disagreements have been amplified in recent years as the

²⁸³ Paul R. Hinlicky, “The Debate over *Status Confessionis*,” *Lutheran Forum* 18, no. 4 (Advent 1984): 26.

²⁸⁴ Michael Hoy, “Confession and Empire: How the Gospel Is at Stake,” in *Being the Church in the Midst of Empire: Trinitarian Reflections* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2007) 118. South African theologian Piet Naudé makes a similar argument when he writes: “Far from aiming at or causing schism (an old criticism against confessions), confession of the doctrine is exactly aimed at restoring the unity of faith already broken by the half-truths!” Naudé, 97.

divisiveness of American politics has permeated the church. According to Peter Wehner, a senior fellow at the conservative think tank Ethics and Public Policy Center, “For many Christians, their politics has become more of an identity marker than their faith. They might insist that they are interpreting their politics through the prism of scripture, with the former subordinate to the latter, but in fact scripture and biblical ethics are often distorted to fit their politics.”²⁸⁵ As communities which people choose to be a part of, churches have largely become silos of agreement. People choose to be in faith communities which share their values and perspectives, limiting their interactions with those who disagree. As this silo-ing has played out in the life of the church, we see congregations which are composed primarily of Republican members (red churches) or Democratic members (blue churches) with a shrinking number of congregations of mixed political affiliation (purple churches). The political divisions of the church are a more recent development but for the last five hundred years Protestant churches have been prone to splitting over all sorts of theological disagreements. Since Martin Luther published his 95 Theses, division, rather than unity, has been a defining characteristic of the church.

The fractured nature of the church means that unity should certainly be sought. Further divisions should be avoided if possible, but we also need to be cautious when we hear the call for unity in the church. These calls to unity can be dangerous when they mean achieving unity through excluding or oppressing others. A unity achieved by marginalizing those who do not fit in with the church is a unity inconsistent with the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.²⁸⁶ We also need to be cautious that leaders and theologians who are calling for unity may be working hard to avoid difficult questions about the church’s power structures.²⁸⁷ According to PC(USA)

²⁸⁵ Wehner.

²⁸⁶ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 133.

²⁸⁷ Pauw, 202.

minister and author Leyton Williams, “I believe the unity that we attempt to create when we think it is in our power is a broken, hollow, and false unity. It’s an earthly unity that often demands a delay or denial of justice. It’s unity that sometimes asks people to leave huge parts of themselves at the door in exchange for a tenuous and disingenuous belonging.”²⁸⁸ The calls for unity may in fact be attempts by some of imposing uniformity on the church and silencing alternative perspectives and interpretations.

Calls for unity, and the unspoken calls for uniformity, have been used in the PC(USA) as a way of those in positions of authority to maintain power. Letty Russell recalls watching the General Assembly use its structures and institutions to limit the influence of women in the church despite ordaining them to all offices of the church for decades.²⁸⁹ At these General Assemblies the message to women and others looking to change the church was that their efforts to reform the church would divide the church. When marginalized groups in the church find a place, those in power feel like they are losing something and cling to the privileges they feel like they are losing. According to Pavlovitz, “When we question doctrine, when we push back against tradition, when we express dissatisfaction with the current system, we often find religious people around us are all too happy to heap regret and guilt on our shoulders and to dole out damnation.”²⁹⁰ Unity has been used in the church to protect the privileges of the powerful and to maintain the oppression of marginalized people and groups.

Unity cannot be the ultimate priority for the church. The church is centered on God, not itself. According to Williams, “I believe that when we pursue earthly unity at all costs, it becomes for us an idol – a distraction from the greater unity that comes from God. And in fact, I

²⁸⁸ Leyton E. Williams, *Holy Disunity: How What Separates Us Can Save Us*, with a foreword by Diana Butler Bass (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 2.

²⁸⁹ Russell, *Just Hospitality*, 5.

²⁹⁰ Pavlovitz, 163.

think this sort of unity – which seems to value collective togetherness over genuine complex relationship – is *unholy* and is driving us further and further apart.”²⁹¹ The church has made unity into an idol by making it *the* priority of the church. Being together has become more important than being faithful. A prime example of this was the issuing of a letter by the faculty of Columbia Theological Seminary and Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in 2014 to the General Assembly “urging unity above all.”²⁹² In this letter, the faculty left no space to doubt or question whether unity, staying together, is more important than anything else. Unfortunately, despite the Reformed tradition’s history of fighting against idolatry, the PC(USA) has a history of making unity an idol.

Unity, Diversity, and Peace

If we are to have a constructive notion of unity in the church, it is important to be honest about how we are divided. Over the last two hundred years the PC(USA) has been part of numerous church divisions and unifications. The divisions are points of pain for the church and are often viewed as failures of the church. And yet, “Spaces of separation can also be fertile soil where new and previously impossible things can grow.”²⁹³ When the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) left in 1973 and 1981, these departures made it possible for women to have a greater role in the life of the church.²⁹⁴

Likewise, with the departure of ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians in 2012

²⁹¹ Williams, 2.

²⁹² Ibid., 31. See also: <https://pres-outlook.org/2014/05/austin-seminary-backs-columbia-seminary-statement-schism/>.

²⁹³ Ibid., 76.

²⁹⁴ The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) split off from the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (PCUS) in the southern branch of the Presbyterian church while the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) left the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (UPCUSA) in the northern strand. The unification of the PCUS and UPCUSA took place in 1983 forming the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Both the PCA and EPC left over objections to the leadership of women in the life of the church.

has paved the way for LGBTQIA+ individuals to become leaders in the PC(USA).²⁹⁵ While it certainly would have been preferable for women and LGBTQIA+ to advance as leaders without schism in the church, had the church made decisions based on unity alone these groups and leaders would have no place in the life of the church today.

Rather than seeking to build the unity of the church based on silencing and marginalizing people who do not conform, the church is called to seek unity amidst the diversity of the people of God. As we saw in the chapter on contemporary heresies, excluding people based on their race, gender, or sexuality is contrary to Jesus' vision for the world. According to Russell, "At God's final eschatological banquet, all will be invited and able to feast together. Like the eucharist and like the church that gathers at Christ's table, the round table is a sign of the coming unity of humanity."²⁹⁶ When we look at the life and ministry of Jesus, we do not see him turning people away, but instead embracing those whom the world and the religious institutions of his day have rejected. He welcomes them into the new community he is building, inviting them to join him at the table for meals and to travel alongside him. The Pharisees and other religious leaders rejected the idea that God could speak in new ways or operate outside of their preconceived notions; they placed God in a box and refused to imagine how the Creator of the Universe could act beyond their expectations. Jesus sees the walls these religious leaders have built to keep other people away from God and goes to the people on the margins. Instead of demanding that people come to God through broken structures, in Jesus God comes to them in their brokenness. The church is called to imitate this barrier-defying movement, reaching out and

²⁹⁵ ECO was formed in 2012 following the changes to the *Book of Order* permitting LGBTQIA+ ordination and marriage.

²⁹⁶ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 17.

connecting with those the church has historically oppressed. This act of hospitality, of welcoming all people, “ascribes value to people. It declares them worth welcoming.”²⁹⁷

In welcoming all people, the church seeks a new model of unity, one built not on keeping out those who are different or in some way deemed “impure” but on welcoming and including the people God loves. Until all are included and welcomed, the church remains fractured and broken.²⁹⁸ A new confession would help this process of inclusion and unity by articulating an inclusive theological anthropology. In the church’s current creeds and confessions, many people are excluded not only from participating in the life of the church, but also from being recognized as fully human. A new confession will not change what the church has said historically, but it can change how the church views people moving forward. Instead of being defined by who is excluded, a new confession can guide the church in its calling to welcome all people. In the decade since the PC(USA) changed its polity to be more inclusive of the LGBTQIA+ community, congregations, presbyteries, and the General Assembly have worked to bring about changes in the church to bring it into alignment with the changes in the polity.

Unity is not just about sharing a table with others; it involves having a shared vision and purpose. Through its Matthew 25 Initiative, the Presbyterian Mission Agency is attempting to unite the PC(USA) in its missional identity. This initiative, which calls for the church to focus on congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, and eradicating systemic poverty, has not yet been embraced by the congregations of the denomination. Of the 8,886 PC(USA) congregations 943 (10.6%) have joined the Matthew 25 Initiative. Meanwhile 74 of the 170 (43.5%) of the presbyteries and 10 of the 16 (62.5%) of the synods have joined. Unfortunately, the Presbyterian Mission Agency has had limited success in uniting the denomination in working

²⁹⁷ Pavlovitz, 72.

²⁹⁸ Russell, *Just Hospitality*, 17.

for justice in the world. A new confession could bring the denomination together more effectively as is evident by the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (UPCUSA) coalescing around the vision of reconciliation articulated in the Confession of 1967.

Fifty-five years later, the church is in need of a contemporary vision for the mission and purpose of the church which will bind the denomination together. Justice can be the unifying mission and vision of the church as it is broad enough to be interpreted uniquely in each particular context while specific enough to give the church a clear sense of purpose. The witness of Scripture points to the centrality of justice in the life of faith following the life and teachings of Jesus and the prophets and apostles. As South African theologian Allan Boesak writes, “The church can do nothing other than be on the side of the poor the dispossessed. It cannot but proclaim a message of liberation from misery, oppression, poverty, domination, exploitation, fear. That means it cannot but search and fight with all its might for justice, peace, reconciliation, human fulfillment.”²⁹⁹ An effective new confession for the PC(USA) would not only clarify the vision of the church in its responsibility in working for justice in the world, but it would also inspire the church to do the work of justice, peacemaking, and reconciliation. It should move churches out of their complacency to engage with their communities to transform systems and structures of oppression. Womanist theologian Emilie Townes provides helpful insight about this mission when she writes: “Transforming unjust structures into just ones will not happen quickly, and this transformation may never happen within our lifetimes or within our ability to see into the future. However, each act we take to move ourselves away from the mayhem of evil is a step closer to transformation. I suggest that no act for justice is too small or too insignificant.”³⁰⁰ The

²⁹⁹ Boesak, 66.

³⁰⁰ Townes, 45.

church has a choice, it can either follow the call of Jesus in working to dismantle systems of oppression or it can turn its back on Jesus and the marginalized people of the world.

The call to transform societal systems and structures often leads church leaders to be accused of being political. All theology and church work are political as they are connected to the contemporary political, economic, and social realities. In the nineteenth century a group of American Presbyterians taught the doctrine of the spirituality of the church. In this doctrine they argued that church should not be involved in social and political matters but instead focus on the spiritual. “But by claiming that slavery was a political issue that the church should leave alone, the promulgators of the ‘spirituality of the church’ were not being apolitical: they were defending the institution of slavery.”³⁰¹ The situation is much the same today over issues of racism, gender and sexuality, economic injustice, and the environment. Those who argue that the church should not involve itself in these debates are not neutral; they are perpetuating systems and structures of oppression. According to church historian Diana Butler Bass:

Jesus was never a supporter of a religious or political party insofar as we know. We do know, however, that Jesus was partisan. He was partisan toward love. He was partisan toward women and children, sinners of all sorts, toward the ill and the mentally challenged, slaves and poorly paid workers and soldiers, those in mean estate, and those under the boot of authoritarianism. He was partisan for outsiders and outcasts and people without banquet invitations, toward those who broke the rules for the sake of others, toward peacemakers and the persecuted and heartbroken. Love is not apolitical. It is the most political – and even the most partisan – thing there is.³⁰²

In each of the Gospels Jesus summarizes the law in the commandments to love God and neighbors.³⁰³ Love is what the church is called to; loving those in the church and outside of it,

³⁰¹ Pauw, 201-2.

³⁰² Bass, *Broken We Kneel*, 149.

³⁰³ See Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-31, Luke 10:25-28, and John 13:31-35.

those marginalized and oppressed by the church and the world. This love is lived out through working for justice.

Unity in the church today does not mean that we agree on everything. Rather, unity in the church today is about coming together to join the work God is doing in the world. It is recognizing and acknowledging the humanity, the *imago Dei*, of one another. It is not ignoring or glossing over our differences but celebrating them as a gift from God. A new confession will help guide the PC(USA) as it strives to live into this inclusive vision for unity.

Still Reforming

A new confession would build unity in the church by welcoming all people with its inclusive anthropology and by joining the church in a common purpose with its missional ecclesiology. While there is a fear that a new confession will cause division in the church, the goal of writing a new confession is to unite the church amidst its ongoing divisions. Calls for unity in the church have been used to impose uniformity and advocates for change have been accused of breaking the unity of the church. When unity is made the top priority of the church the church makes unity an idol. As the church moves forward into God's future it is called to seek unity amidst diversity and imitate Jesus' boundary-defying movement.

Chapter 6: Still Reforming

Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda. Reformed and always reforming. When the early reformers crafted this motto, they recognized that the church was constantly in need of reform. They were addressing the errors they saw in the Roman Catholic Church and were working to bring the church into closer alignment with God's vision for the church and world. That work of correcting past errors and realigning the church is ongoing. As feminist theologian Amy Plantinga Pauw observes, "Reformed ecclesiology is rightly marked by a stark recognition of the church's fallibility."³⁰⁴ The church gets things wrong at times and needs to have the humility and honesty to acknowledge these past and ongoing errors. Leading 20th century Presbyterian theologian Shirly Guthrie writes, the "church in the past sometimes misunderstood the Bible and misused its confessions to support a cultural and political status quo that was regarded as normative, and how, with a better understanding of Scripture and its confessions (and writing new ones), the church has been able to change its mind and correct former mistakes."³⁰⁵ The writing of a new confession with an inclusive anthropology and missional ecclesiology is an opportunity to correct errors in past interpretations of Scripture, particularly on topics of racism, heterosexism, and sexism.³⁰⁶ And just as the church needs to have humility in looking back at what the church has said before, it must have humility in writing a new confession. All creeds and confessions are human products and therefore imperfect and flawed.

³⁰⁴ Pauw, 190.

³⁰⁵ Shirley C. Guthrie, review of *Reading the Bible and the Confessions: The Presbyterian Way*, by Jack Rogers, *Theology Today* 57, no. 3 (Oct 2000): 431.

³⁰⁶ For example, feminist theologian Dawn DeVries writes: "As cultural goods produced almost exclusively by men, Scripture, creeds, dogmatic canons, and confessions are all saturated with the assumptions and the values of patriarchy, and thus only a critical reinterpretation of them can contribute to the struggle for women's full humanity." DeVries, 41.

But that does not mean we should avoid speaking up. Our calling is to participate in the ongoing reform of the church, correcting the wrongs of the past and present as best as we are able.

The ongoing reformation of the church is a defining characteristic of the Reformed tradition, of which the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a part. Our reformation is a continual process as no church doctrine or practice is beyond criticism and reform. Church historian Diana Butler Bass puts it well when she writes: “tradition is a fluid, ever-creative process. Every generation is called not to preserve tradition (like a museum piece), but to craft it anew (like clay).”³⁰⁷ The church is not called to simply repeat what it has said in past generations, but to rearticulate the faith for the present building on the wisdom of the past. According to Guthrie, Reformed churches “have continually asked in every new time and place what the living God we come to know in scripture is saying and doing *here* and *now*, and what we have to say and do if we are to be faithful and obedient Christians in *our* particular time and place – even if it means saying and doing things that may seem strange and shocking when compared with what Christians in other times and places have felt called to say and do.”³⁰⁸ If the church never changed how it interpreted Scripture or understood the character and vision of God or its doctrinal statements, it would not be able to adapt to new situations.

The affirmation that God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, does not also mean that the church is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. The church is currently going through a period of significant transition and transformation. According to Bass, “Conventional, comforting Christianity has failed. It does not work. For the churches that insist preaching it, the jig is up. We cannot go back, and we should not want to.”³⁰⁹ This change in the church is often

³⁰⁷ Bass, “8 These on The Cottage Door.”

³⁰⁸ Guthrie, *Always Being Reformed*, 30.

³⁰⁹ Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 36-7.

frightening for those of us within the church; there is fear about the uncertainty of the future of the church. The Reformed tradition, though, has expected the Holy Spirit to guide the church in every time and place. We are in a moment of discerning where the Holy Spirit is leading the church in this period of transition and change.

The reform of the church is an ongoing process as the church discerns its identity, mission, and how to speak to the world in today. The writing of new creeds and confessions is central to the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition as the church is called to speak in new ways to the world in new situations. The writing of new creeds plays a central role in the ongoing reform of the church.

The twentieth century creeds and confessions were written to address false teachings of the church and to build the identity and purpose of the church. The Theological Declaration of Barmen uses the traditional Reformed critique of idolatry and applies it to the Nazification of the church. Barmen also makes it clear that domination and exploitation are theological and ethical concerns of the church. The Confession of 1967 was written so that the contemporary theology and practices of the church would be reflected in the official doctrinal standards of the church. It also demonstrates how the creeds and confessions are not only concerned with doctrine but ethics through its focus on reconciliation and social justice. The Belhar Confession further developed the ethical nature of confessions by calling the church to action against apartheid, a false teaching of the church and society which was developed with the Dutch Reformed Church. The Brief Statement of Faith was written to form the identity and purpose of the church in a period of transition and change. It established the precedent of writing a new confession when it is beneficial to the life of the church and corrects errors of previous creeds and confessions. All four of these confessions builds on the Reformed tradition to speak to its context. The writing of

a new confession with an inclusive anthropology and missional ecclesiology would build on these previous confessions as the church speaks to the world today.

Racism, heterosexism, sexism, and Christian nationalism are inconsistent with Reformed theology, distorting not only our understanding of human nature but also our view of the God who creates all people in God's own image. Through individual prejudice and the systems and structures of society racism denies the full humanity of people of color. Unfortunately, racism has its roots within the church and continues to be at work within the PC(USA) today.

Heterosexism draws on a few select passages from Scripture to demand the world conform to conservative Evangelicals' notion of "Biblical marriage." This notion of "Biblical marriage" operates with a static view of humanity and places sexuality at the heart of the gospel, subordinating core principles of grace and love. Through sexism the church treats women as inferior to men, failing to recognize and celebrate the gifts women bring to life and ministry. The church's use of exclusively male language for God has created an idol of a male god within a tradition which has focused on opposing all forms of idolatry. A new inclusive confession would continue the work of the Brief Statement of Faith in developing an understanding of the ministry of the church which is open to all people. Christian nationalism identifies the United States as God's chosen nation and longs to return to an idealized past so that the nation can truly thrive. Those who are not conservative Evangelicals are seen as enemies and threats to the well-being of the nation. Christian nationalism sees faith in the nationalist agenda supersede faith in God, creating an idol of nationalist ideology. A new inclusive confession should develop a constructive and inclusive anthropology which builds on the work of the Belhar Confession and the Brief Statement of Faith. This confession would expand and further develop the essential tenet of the church that all people are created equally in the image of God. A new confession

with an inclusive anthropology would deepen our understanding of what it means to be human and enrich our knowledge of God.

A new confession with a missional ecclesiology will guide and inspire the church as it joins the mission of God in the world. We have seen this with the Earth Care Congregations program following the adoption of The Brief Statement of Faith and the Matthew 25 and Hands and Feet initiatives following the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in the *Book of Confessions*. The PC(USA) is a church in transition through declining membership and participation, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the expansion of online ministry. In this period of transition, a new missional confession would offer clarity and guidance, sparking imagination and creativity as the church joins the mission of God in the world. The new confession would be a call to action, particularly to the ministry hospitality which connects the inclusive anthropology and the missional ecclesiology of the confession.

A new confession would build unity in the church by welcoming all people with its inclusive anthropology and by joining the church in a common purpose with its missional ecclesiology. Amid the fear that a new confession could spark further division within the church, a new confession would be written with the goal of uniting the church amidst its ongoing divisions. Advocates for change in the church past and present have been accused of breaking the unity of the church. Unity cannot be the highest priority for the church as it has been used to protect the privileges of the powerful and to perpetuate the oppression and marginalization of people and groups. When unity is made the top priority of the church, the church makes unity an idol. As the church moves forward into God's future it is called to seek unity amidst diversity and imitate Jesus' boundary-defying movement.

In chapter 1 we used the ordination questions about officers of the church being guided by the confessions of the church as the starting point for understanding the role of the creeds and confessions in the life of the church. It is therefore fitting that we conclude our study of the call for the PC(USA) to write a new inclusive and missional confession with another ordination question. The eighth question asked of every person ordained as a minister, elder, or deacon in the PC(USA) is: “Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?”³¹⁰ Ministry requires enormous energy, bountiful curiosity, fertile imagination, and abiding love. May we use these gifts to lead the church into its future through the writing of a new inclusive and missional confession.

³¹⁰ *The Book of Order*, W-4.0404, 104.

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