

## What's a Confession?

Two ways of understanding a confession:

1. an admission of guilt (criminals/sinners confess wrongdoing; the famous write scandalous “true confessions”)
2. a profession of faith (take a stand for faith, regardless of consequences or persecution that may follow)

Two kinds of Christian confession:

1. act of Christian faith – all Christians confess, “Jesus Christ is Lord”
2. document of Christian faith- formally spells out a church’s understanding of the lordship of Christ; historically, called creeds, declarations of faith, etc.

### When does the church write a confession?

Historically, the church has written a confession when it must. Each occasion has been characterized by one or more of the following (frequently all):

1. an internal danger – e.g., a distortion of the truth that threatens the church’s faith
2. an external threat, – e.g., political movement seeking to compromise the church’s commitment to the gospel
3. a great opportunity to share the gospel to a world that needs it

### What's the content of a confession?

At heart, all confessions profess with the earliest church, “Jesus is Lord.” To protect this simple confession from misunderstanding and misuse, the church soon had to talk about:

- the relation between Jesus and the God of Israel.
- the relation between Jesus and the Holy Spirit (a Trinitarian confession)
- the reality and work of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the past, present, and future of the world, church, and individual Christian.
- God’s claim on the lives of people in the church and in the world.

The confession “Jesus is Lord” led to the development of a full theology and ethic.

### What's the function of a confession?

1. Worship – e.g., Apostles’ & Nicene Creeds
2. Defense of orthodoxy – true of most confessions
3. Instruction – e.g., Heidelberg & Westminster Catechisms
4. Rallying point in times of danger and persecution – e.g., Theological Declaration of Barmen
5. Church order and discipline – e.g., Presbyterian Church’s *Book of Confessions*

### What are characteristics of a confession in the Reformed tradition?

1. Ecumenical– they seek to confess what all believe
2. Faith and practice – they emphasize what Christians believe and how they live
3. Their authority is limited (unique to the Reformed tradition):
  - a. provisional (the work of fallible people),
  - b. temporary (God may give a fresh word), and
  - c. relative (subordinate to Scripture).

## **What are our confessions & when were they written?**

### **The Nicene Creed**

325-381AD – countered a widening church rift by affirming the divinity of Christ

### **The Apostles' Creed**

180-800AD – countered erroneous teaching with a summary of orthodox faith

### **The Scots Confession**

1560 – Upon becoming sovereign, Scottish Parliament declared Scotland a Protestant nation and commissioned the confession. It sets forth 3 marks of the true and faithful church: true preaching of God's Word; right administration of the Sacraments; and ecclesiastical discipline.

### **The Heidelberg Catechism**

1562 – attempted to provide common ground between Lutherans and Protestants in a controversy over the presence of Christ in the Sacraments.

### **The Second Helvetic (Latin for Swiss) Confession**

Composed in 1561 – came to light as a result of Lutheran reaction to Heidelberg Catechism, which they considered too Reformed. More moderate & ecumenical, it affirms the authority of Scripture & includes an article on predestination.

The Westminster Standards - commissioned in 1643 at a time of great internal and political conflicts. Included a Form of Presbyterian Church Government, a Directory of Public Worship, and three confessions:

**Confession of Faith** – affirms God's work from its beginning in creation through its end in the last judgment and resurrection

**The Shorter Catechism** – written for the education of children

**The Longer Catechism** – designed for public exposition from the pulpit

### **The Theological Declaration of Barmen**

1934 – written by Karl Barth, others, to help German Christians withstand the challenges of the Nazi party.

### **The Confession of 1967**

Drawn from 2 Corinthians 5:19, in response to the challenge of the 1960s to all churches everywhere to restate their faith. With its adoption, the PCUSA also adopted a *Book of Confessions*.

### **A Brief Statement of Faith**

1983 – articulated the common identity of the northern and southern Presbyterian churches on the occasion of their reunion to form the PCUSA. Unlike the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds (which move directly from Jesus' birth to his death), it emphasizes Jesus' ministry in Judea and Galilee.