

PREFACE

The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) consists of two volumes. Part I of the Constitution is the *Book of Confessions*, which contains the official texts of the confessional documents. Part II of the Constitution, the *Book of Order*, is published separately and consists of four sections: The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, the Form of Government, the Directory for Worship, and the Rules of Discipline.

Chapter Two of The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity—“The Church and Its Confessions”—sets forth the church’s understanding of the role and function of the confessions in the life of the church.

F-2.01 The Purpose of Confessional Statements

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.

The creeds, confessions and catechisms of the *Book of Confessions* are both historical and contemporary. Each emerged in a particular time and place in response to a particular situation. Thus, each confessional document should be respected in its historical particularity; none should be altered to conform to current theological, ethical, or linguistic norms. The confessions are not confined to the past, however; they do not simply express what the church was, what it used to believe, and what it once resolved to do. The confessions address the church’s current faith and life, declaring contemporary convictions and actions.

The 197th General Assembly (1985) adopted “Definitions and Guidelines on Inclusive Language.” This document, reaffirmed by the 212th General Assembly (2000), states that “Effort should be made at every level of the church to use inclusive language with respect to the people of God.” Some of the church’s confessional documents, written before the church committed itself to inclusive language for the people of God, use male language to refer to men and women. Although the original language is retained in the *Book of Confessions*, readers are reminded of the church’s policy and the commitment the policy expresses.

Specific statements in 16th and 17th century confessions and catechisms in the *Book of Confessions* contain condemnations or derogatory characterizations of the Roman Catholic Church: Chapters XVIII and XXII of the Scots Confession; Questions and Answer 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism; and Chapters II, III, XVII, and XX, of the Second Helvetic Confession. (Chapters XXII, XXV, and XXIX of the Westminster Confession of Faith have been amended to remove anachronous and offensive language. Chapter XXVIII of the French Confession does not have constitutional standing.) While these statements emerged from substantial doctrinal dis-

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putes, they reflect 16th and 17th century polemics. Their condemnations and characterizations of the Catholic Church are not the position of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and are not applicable to current relationships between the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Catholic Church. [Note: These sections have been marked with an asterisk.]

The tension between the confessions' historical and contemporary nature is a fruitful tension within the church. The confessions are not honored if they are robbed of historical particularity by imagining that they are timeless expressions of truth. They are best able to instruct, lead, and guide the church when they are given freedom to speak in their own voices. The confessions are not respected if they are robbed of contemporary authority by imagining that they are historical artifacts. They are best able to instruct, lead, and guide the church when they are given freedom to speak now to the church and the world.

The creeds and confessions of this church arose in response to particular circumstances within the history of God's people. They claim the truth of the Gospel at those points where their authors perceived that truth to be at risk. They are the result of prayer, thought, and experience within a living tradition. They appeal to the universal truth of the Gospel while expressing that truth within the social and cultural assumptions of their time. They affirm a common faith tradition, while also from time to time standing in tension with each other. (*Book of Order*, F-2.01)

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The Advisory Council on Discipleship and Worship appointed a task force in 1982 to prepare a report on the confessional nature of the church. Soon thereafter the Council on Theology and Culture was invited to participate in the study and appointed two persons to join the membership of the task force. The urgency of the study was heightened when the 195th General Assembly (1983) recognized it as a basic resource for the work of the Special Committee on a Brief Statement of Faith and instructed that committee to be in consultation with the task force as it pursues its work.

The task force sought first to discover how the confessions are actually used by questioning the presbyteries and seminaries of the church, persons attending the 195th General Assembly (1983), and readers of *Monday Morning*. These surveys substantiated the need for a careful study that would clarify and encourage proper use of the church's confessions.

In light of the results of these surveys the task force concentrated its study on ten questions: (1) Are creeds different from confessions? (2) Why are confessions written? (3) How do confessions relate to Scripture? (4) How do confessions relate to their historic context? (5) Why do we have more than one confession? (6) How do the confessions in the *Book of Confessions* relate to each other? (7) How do Reformed confessions relate to other confessions? (8) How can confessions be used in the teaching ministry? (9) How can confessions be used in other parts of congregational life and mission? (10) How do confessions relate to ordination?

This paper is an attempt to deal with these questions as they arise in the following discussion of (1) the nature and purpose of church confessions in general, (2) the unique role of confessions in the Presbyterian-Reformed tradition, (3) the *Book of Confessions*.

I. The Nature and Purpose of Confessions

Many people are confused by talk of “confessing,” “confessions,” and “confessional” churches. Both inside and outside the church confession is ordinarily associated with admission of wrongdoing and guilt: criminals “confess” that they have committed a crime; famous people write “true confessions” about their scandalous lives; persons visit a “confessional” to tell of their sin. In Christian tradition, however, confession has an earlier, positive sense. To confess means openly to affirm, declare, acknowledge or take a stand for what one believes to be true. The truth that is confessed may include the admission of sin and guilt but is more than that. When Christians make a confession, they say, “This is what we most assuredly believe, regardless of what others may believe and regardless of the opposition, rejection, or persecution that may come to us for taking this stand.”

*This text was added by action of the 209th General Assembly (1997). See *Minutes*, 1997, Part I, p. 162, paragraph 19.0013. The text for this report can be found in the *Minutes*, 1986, Part I, pp. 516–27.

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A distinction must be made between confession as an act of Christian faith and a confession as a document of Christian faith.

On the one hand, all Christians are by definition people who confess their faith—people who make their own the earliest Christian confession: “Jesus Christ is Lord.” The Christian church, called and held together by Jesus Christ himself, lives only through the continual renewal of this fundamental confession of faith that all Christians and Christian bodies make together.

On the other hand, a confession of faith is an officially adopted statement that spells out a church’s understanding of the meaning and implications of the one basic confession of the lordship of Christ. Such statements have not always been called confessions. They have also been called creeds, symbols, formulas, definitions, declarations of faith, statements of belief, articles of faith, and other similar names. All these are different ways of talking about the same thing, though “creed” has ordinarily been used for short affirmations of faith, while other names have been used for longer ones.

While the first and primary meaning of confession as an act of faith must always be kept in mind, this paper will concentrate on the second meaning, confession as an officially adopted church document.

Presbyterian and Reformed churches are not the only churches with confessional standards. The Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran and to a lesser extent the Anglican, Episcopal, and Methodist churches are also confessional bodies. Even so-called “free” churches that acknowledge only the Bible as their creed have often made semi-authoritative confessions of faith. Most Christian churches officially or informally share the faith of the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. Therefore what is said in this section about the role of creeds and confessions is applicable not only to Presbyterian and Reformed churches but to the Christian church as a whole. Most of the examples cited come from the Reformed tradition but similar examples could also be drawn from other traditions.

A. *The Three Directions of Confessions of Faith*

A confession of faith may be defined more precisely as a public declaration before God and the world of what a church believes.

A confession is a public declaration of what a church believes. Individual Christians may and should confess their own personal faith, but a confession of faith is more than a personal affirmation of faith. It is an officially adopted statement of what a community of Christians believe. This communal character of confessions of faith is made explicitly clear in confessions such as the Scots and Second Helvetic Confessions and the Barmen Declaration, which speak of what “we” believe. But it is also implicit in such confessions as the Apostles’ Creed and Heidelberg Catechism, which speak of what “I” believe, and in other confessions such as Westminster and the Confession of 1967, which speak more objectively. Whatever their form, confessions of faith express what a body of Christians believe in common.

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These affirmations of the church's faith always have three reference points: God, the church itself, and the world. Confessions of faith are first of all the church's solemn and thankful response to God's self-revelation, expressed with a sense of responsibility to be faithful and obedient to God. Secondly, in a confession of faith members of a Christian community seek to make clear to themselves who they are, what they believe, and what they resolve to do. Finally, Christians confess their common faith not only to praise and serve God and not only to establish their self-identity but to speak to the world a unified word that declares who they are and what they stand for and against. Confessions thus have a social and political as well as theological and ecclesiological significance.

B. *The Time for Confession*

Throughout the history of the Christian movement churches have written confessions of faith because they feel that they must do so, not just because they think it would be a good idea. Confessions of faith may result from a sense of urgent need to correct some distortion of the truth and claim of the gospel that threatens the integrity of the church's faith and life from within the church. They may result from some political or cultural movement outside the church that openly attacks or subtly seeks to compromise its commitment to the gospel. Sometimes the urgency to confess comes from the church's conviction that it has a great new insight into the promises and demands of the gospel that is desperately needed by both church and world. Frequently, all three occasions—internal danger, external threat, and great opportunity—are behind the great confessions of the church at the same time. In any case, the church writes confessions of faith when it faces a situation of life or a situation of death so urgent that it cannot remain silent but must speak, even at the cost of its own security, popularity, and success. Or to put it negatively, when all the church has to say is the restatement of what everyone already knows and believes, or when it has no word to speak other than safe generalities that ignore or cover over the concrete, specific issues of a crisis situation—then it is not the time for confession even though what is confessed might be true in itself.

C. *The Content of Confessions of Faith*

At the heart of all confessions is the earliest confession of the New Testament church, "Jesus is Lord." (Strictly speaking, therefore, Christians confess not what but in whom they believe.) But the church discovered very early that in order to protect this simple confession from misunderstanding and misuse, it had to talk about the relation between Jesus and the God of Israel, and between Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The earliest Christological confession became a Trinitarian confession. That led to further reflection on biblical witness to the reality and work of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the past, present, and future history of the world in general, in the particular history of the people of God, and in the life of every individual Christian. Moreover, the church could not talk about the "lordship" of Jesus without also talking about the claim the triune God has on the lives of people in their personal and social relationships in the church and in the world. The confession "Jesus is Lord" necessarily led to the development of a full theology and ethic.

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The length and focus of the church's confessions have varied according to which elements of this developing and expanding faith it has believed should be emphasized to meet the needs and challenges of particular situations.

Sometimes the situation has called not for a summary of everything Christians believe but for a short pointed confession dealing with one or more specific issues. The Nicene and Chalcedon Creeds, for instance, were the church's response to fundamental heresies in the ancient church concerning the identity of Jesus Christ. The Barmen Declaration was the response of some Reformed and Lutheran churches in Germany to what they believed was the one most critical issue in their situation in 1933, the relation between loyalty to Jesus Christ and loyalty to the state. The Confession of 1967 reformulated important themes of Christian doctrine in confessional literature and showed their social ethical implications.

Other confessions such as the Apostles' Creed are short summaries of elements of the whole of Christian faith.

The Lutheran and Reformed confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries tended to be longer and more comprehensive summaries of faith. In reforming the church they dealt with the most critical theological and political issues that divided Roman Catholics and Protestants—and Lutheran, Reformed, and Anabaptist Protestants—in the Reformation and post-Reformation period.

In every time and place the church is called to make the implications of its fundamental confession of the Lordship of Jesus Christ unmistakably clear and relevant. But in order to do that it has had in every new situation to decide afresh what to say and what to leave unsaid, how much and how little to say, what to emphasize and what for the time being to pass over, which internal and external dangers are critical and which are less critical.

D. *The Functions of Confessions*

The shape of confessions has been determined not only by the historical situation in which they were written but also by the uses for which they have been intended.

1. *Worship.* Like the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, some creeds and confessions have been used as acts of worship in the church's liturgy. This use is a reminder of the fact that the church's confessions are first of all acts of praise, thanksgiving, and commitment in the presence of God.

2. *Defense of orthodoxy.* 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.

3. *Instruction.* The confessions have been used for the education of leaders and members of the church in the right interpretation of Scripture and church tradition and to guard against the danger of individuals or groups selecting from the Bible or church tradition only that which confirms their personal opinions and desires.

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Confessions written in question-and-answer form (like the Heidelberg and Westminster Catechisms) were written to prepare children and adult converts for baptism and participation in the fellowship of believers.

4. *Rallying-point in times of danger and persecution.* Confessions have often prepared and strengthened Christians to stand together in faithfulness to the gospel when they have been tempted to surrender to powerful forces of political, racial, social, or economic injustice.

5. *Church order and discipline.* Some churches, like the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), have sought to preserve the purity and unity of the church by requiring its ministers and church officers to accept the teachings of its confessions in order to be ordained. The government of these churches is also determined by their confessions of faith.

Some confessions were originally intended to serve more than one of these purposes. Others have in fact served multiple purposes though their writers may not have foreseen how they would be used.

E. *The Historical Limitations of Confessions*

Confessions address the issues, problems, dangers, and opportunities of a given historical situation. But confessions are related to their historical situation also in another way. Even when their writers have believed they were formulating Christian truth valid for all time and places, their work has been directed not only to but limited by their particular time and place. Throughout the history of the church—and also in our time—confessions have been deliberately or unconsciously expressed in the language and thought forms that were commonly accepted when they were written. God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ has sometimes been clarified but also distorted by the language and presuppositions of this or that ancient or current philosophy. The great classical confessions were written before the discoveries of modern science and reflect an outdated understanding of the structure of the world and its natural processes (just as our “modern” confessions will one day seem outdated and “primitive” to a later world). The theology and ethics of confessions of every age are shaped by what seem to be the normative or preferable sexual, familial, social, economic, cultural, and political patterns of a particular period of history. Even those confessions that have sought to be grounded exclusively in biblical revelation have often confused the revelation itself with various historically conditioned thought forms and cultural patterns in which it was received and preserved by people who lived in the ancient Near East. Modern scholarship has shown how extensively earlier confessions of faith saw in Scripture only the confirmation of what they thought they already knew about God, the world and human life in it (just as future scholarship will reveal how we have done the same thing in our time).

The confessions of the church, in other words, have indeed interpreted, defended, and preserved biblical-Christian truth. They have united the Christian community in its one task of bearing witness to the one Christian confession that Jesus is Lord. But at the same time, despite all good intentions, they have also distorted the

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truth revealed in Jesus Christ, been unable to grasp parts of the biblical witness to God's presence and work in Christ, and divided the church into churches with conflicting views of what Christian faith and life are all about. Is there any way to distinguish between the truth to which confessions of faith seek to bear witness and their inadequate witness to the truth? Christians in the Presbyterian-Reformed tradition believe they know at least how to go about this task. Their solution will be discussed in the proper place in the following section of this paper.

II. Confessions of Faith in the Reformed Tradition

Everything we have said about confessions in general apply also to Reformed confessions. But now we turn to some of the most important characteristics of the Reformed understanding of the nature and purpose of confessions that distinguish it from other confessional traditions and theological movements.

A. The Ecumenical Character of Reformed Churches

From the very beginning and throughout their history the Reformed churches have sought to represent the church catholic. Their confessions do not speak only of what Reformed churches or Presbyterians believe but seek to confess what Christians believe. They have not claimed to be the only true church, with a monopoly on Christian faith and life, but have always been open to learn from other churches and traditions and eager to participate in conversations with them that could lead to mutual correction and reconciliation.

We must not exaggerate this ecumenical openness, of course. Individuals, groups, and whole denominations who claim to be Reformed have sometimes assumed or openly declared that only this or that particular Reformed church is the true church, that all other churches (including other Reformed denominations) are false or at least fatally corrupted, and that conversation with them can only compromise the true understanding of Christian faith and life which is completely, infallibly, and unchangeably contained in this or that particular Reformed confession. But such an attitude is itself un-Reformed and contrary to the very confessional documents used to support it.

Characteristic of the ecumenicity of the genuine Reformed tradition and its confessions is this statement in the confession of the Synod of Berne in 1528:

But where something is brought before us by our pastors or by others, which brings us closer to Christ, and in accordance with God's word is more conducive to mutual friendship and Christian love than the interpretation now presented, we will gladly accept it and will not limit the course of the Holy Spirit, which does not go backwards towards the flesh but always forward towards the image of Jesus Christ our Lord.

B. Faith and Practice

It is typical of confessions in the Reformed tradition, that they emphasize not only what Christians believe but also how Christians live, not only orthodox Christian faith but also thankful and obedient Christian "practice," not only justification by grace through faith but also sanctification by grace evidenced in

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“good works.” All Christian traditions acknowledge the fact that faith without works is dead. But in Reformed confessions the active Christian life is given special and unique emphasis.

1. *The Claim of God on all of Life.* Reformed confessional tradition follows Calvin in emphasizing the authority of God over every area of human life: over personal and familial relationships, over the organization and government of the Christian community, and over social, economic, and political “secular” communities as well. Reformed confessions therefore contain both personal and social ethics, a gospel of salvation and a social gospel. (See, for instance, the comprehensive and detailed exposition of the Ten Commandments in the Westminster Larger Catechism.)

Reformed confessions of different periods differ in their understanding of precisely what God requires. Sometimes they have been too certain that the will of God was identical with the historically and socially conditioned presuppositions of Reformed Christians in a particular time and place. Sometimes they have confused the rule of God in the world with the rule of the church. But however they differ and whatever mistakes they may have made, a consistent theme in Reformed confessions of all periods and places is the responsibility of individual Christians and the Christian church to seek to order all of human life according to the sovereign will of the God who is known in Jesus Christ through Scripture. No room is left for the belief of Christians in some other traditions that there are some areas of individual and social life that are not claimed by God and in which they are excused or prohibited from serving God.

2. *Grace and Law.* Reformed confessional tradition follows Calvin in believing that because the meaning and purpose of God’s sovereign will is made known in Jesus Christ, and because sin separates humanity from God and each other, God’s rule over and in the world must be understood as gracious rule exercised for our good. God gives us commands and requirements in order to guide and help us to the achievement of wholeness and happiness in our individual lives and justice, freedom, and peace in human society. The Heidelberg Catechism therefore expresses the theology of all Reformed confessions when it puts its exposition of the law of God under the heading “Thankfulness.” The demands of God are understood in Reformed tradition as the good gift of God to be received with gratitude, exercised for the welfare of all human beings, and obeyed in confidence that God’s grace gives us the ability to do what God’s law requires. Law, in other words, is a part of the gospel of saving grace, not something opposed to it or some alternative to it.

This theology of grace and law is one of the most important things that distinguishes the Reformed tradition from other traditions and theologies. (a) It distinguishes Reformed Christians from other Christians who understand obedience to God’s commandments as a means of earning or cooperating with the saving grace of God rather than as a thankful response to saving grace already freely given and powerfully at work. (b) It distinguishes Reformed Christians from other Christians

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who believe that the law of God serves primarily the negative purpose of exposing sin, leading to repentance, and leading to the gospel of God's saving grace rather than the positive purpose of guidance offered by the gospel. (c) It distinguishes Reformed Christians from the belief of some other Christians that Christian freedom is freedom from rather than freedom for obedience to the commands of God. (d) It distinguishes Reformed Christians from other Christians for whom obedience to the law is an end in itself rather than a means of loving and serving God and other people. (e) Finally, it distinguishes Reformed Christians from those who use the law of God to justify oppressive "order" in society for the benefit of a few rather than to achieve a free and just society for all.

One can of course find in the present as well as in the past individuals, groups, and whole denominations of Christians who call themselves Reformed yet understand and use the law of God in all of the un-Reformed ways we have mentioned. But insofar as they do so, they have misunderstood and misused the very theology of grace and law based on God's gracious sovereignty that is one of the most distinctive elements of their own Reformed confessions.

C. The Authority of Confessions in the Reformed Tradition

The Reformed tradition is unique in its understanding of the authority of its confessions. The most revealing clue to this unique understanding is the great number of confessions it has produced. Other Protestant confessional traditions have been content with only a few confessional statements written by a few people within narrow geographical or historical limits. All the Lutheran confessions, for instance, were written by a few Germans in Germany between 1529 and 1580. Authoritative Roman Catholic teaching comes from church councils or from the Pope. But from beginning of the Reformation wherever the Reformed church spread, Reformed Christians made new confessions of their faith, first city by city then country by country. The confessions of Bern, Basel, Zurich, Geneva, and other Swiss cities were followed by one or more confessions written for Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, Holland, Hungary, and Scotland. The great period of confession writing came to an end for two centuries after the seventeenth century (because under the influence of Protestant orthodoxy the Reformed churches lost sight of the reason for multiple confessions and because of the liberal theology that dominated the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was suspicious of confessional restraint.) But the twentieth century has seen a revival of Reformed confessional writing. Reformed churches have participated in the preparation of well over thirty new confessions that have been completed or are in process.

This multiplicity of confessions, written by many people in many places over such a great span of time, obviously means that the Reformed tradition has never been content to recognize any one confession or collection of confessions as an absolute, infallible statement of the faith of Reformed Christians for all time. In the Reformed tradition confessional statements do have authority as statements of the faith of Reformed Christians at particular times and places, and there is a remarka-

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ble consistency in their fundamental content. Some have had convincing power for a long time. Nevertheless, for Reformed Christians all confessional statements have only a provisional, temporary, relative authority.

Reformed confessions themselves provide three interrelated reasons for this unique attitude toward confessional authority:

1. Confessions have a *provisional authority* (and are therefore subject to revision and correction) because all confessions are the work of limited, fallible, sinful human beings and churches. In our time we have perhaps become more aware than most of those who wrote and adopted Reformed confessions in the past that even when confessions intend to serve only the revealed truth and will of God, they are also influenced by the sexual, racial, and economic biases and by the scientific and cultural limitations of a particular situation. But from the very beginning and throughout its history Reformed Christians and their confessions have acknowledged with the Westminster Confession of 1646 that: “All synods or councils since the apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith and practice, but to be used as a help in both” (XXIV–XXXII).

2. Confessions have a *temporary authority* (and are therefore subject to revision and correction) because faith in the living God present and at work in the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit means always to be open to hear a new and fresh word from the Lord. As the multiplicity of Reformed confessions indicates, Reformed Christians have never been content to learn only how Christians before them discerned and responded to the word and work of God; they have continually asked in every new time, place, and situation, “What is the living Lord of Scripture saying and doing here and now, and what do we have to say and do to be faithful and obedient in our time?” The Barmen Declaration speaks for the best intentions of the whole Reformed tradition when it says, “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.”

3. Confessions have a *relative authority* (and are therefore subject to revision and correction) because they are subordinate to the higher authority of Scripture, which is the norm for discerning the will and work of God in every time and place. A frequently repeated theme in Reformed confessions is their subjection of their own theological and ethical thought—including their interpretation of scripture itself—to this higher authority, or to the authority of the Holy Spirit who speaks through it:

We protest that if any man will note in this confession of ours any article or sentence repugnant to God’s holy word, that it would please him of his gentleness and for Christian charity’s sake to admonish us of the same in writing; and we upon our honor and fidelity, by God’s grace do promise unto him satisfaction from the mouth of God, that is, from his holy scriptures, or else reformation of that which he shall prove to be amiss. (Preface to the Scots Confession.)

The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures. (Westminster Confession, 6.010.)

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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. No one type of confession is exclusively valid, no one statement is irreformable. Obedience to Jesus Christ alone identifies the one universal church and supplies the continuity of its tradition. . . . (Preface to the Confession of 1967, 9.03.)

Reformed Christians are put in a difficult position with their self-limiting, self-relativising confessions. On the one hand they are bound: so long as they are faithful members of a Reformed church they are not free to interpret Christian faith and life (or even Scripture itself) however seems best to them personally, but are committed to submit themselves to the authority and guidance of the confessional standards of their church. On the other hand they are free: the very confessions to which they are bound allow—require—them to remember the human limitations and fallibility of their church’s confessional standards, to be open to hear a new and perhaps different word from the living Lord the standards confess, and to examine critically the church’s teachings in the light of further study of Scripture. It is not surprising, then, that Reformed Christians and whole Reformed denominations have sometimes been unable to maintain this balance between authority and freedom. Some have contradicted the very Reformed tradition they confess by claiming for this or that confession the absolute, infallible, unchangeable truth and authority that the Roman Catholic church has traditionally claimed for its official teaching. Others, while calling themselves Reformed, have acted as if they were members of a nonconfessional “free” church, insisting on their freedom to interpret Scripture for themselves without regard for the guidance and restraint of their church’s confessional consensus. Those who choose confessional authority over personal freedom make impossible the continual reformation of the church called for by Reformed confessions themselves. They run the risk of idolatrously giving to the church the ultimate authority that belongs alone to the living God we come to know in Jesus Christ through the Bible. On the other hand, those who choose personal freedom over the confessional consensus of the church destroy the church’s unity, cut themselves off from the guidance of the church as they interpret Scripture, and run the risk of serving not biblical truth but the personal biases they read into Scripture.

Difficult as it is to find the way between church authority without personal freedom or personal freedom without church authority, a distinctive mark of the Reformed tradition is the belief that it is only by seeking this difficult way that the church can be a united community of Christians who are both “reformed and always being reformed.”

III. The Presbyterian Book of Confessions

This section will deal with some questions concerning the particular confessional documents included in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

A. Why a Book of Confessions

For most of their history Presbyterians in the United States were guided by essentially a single confessional standard: the Westminster Confession with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms that translated it into question and answer form for edu-

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ational purposes. It is not surprising then that many Presbyterians have been disturbed by the idea of a book of confessions: Is it not contrary to Reformed tradition? Does not the adoption of a plurality of confessions water down or compromise the confessional nature of the Presbyterian Church? Will not Presbyterians be confused by so many documents, especially since they do not always say the same thing? Will they not tend to pay little attention to any of them because they are overwhelmed by so much confessional material? Two answers can be given to these questions, the first historical and the second theological.

In the first place there is a historical answer. Although the idea of a collection of confessions is relatively new for North American Presbyterians, it is not at all new in the history of the Reformed tradition. In 1581 (still in the period of the Reformation itself) the Reformed churches of Europe issued a *Harmonia Confessionum Fidei* (*A Harmony of Confessions of Faith*) which set out in parallel form the main doctrines of the confessions of eight Reformed and three Lutheran churches. This harmony listed the agreement between the various confessions but pointed out the disagreements as well. Moreover, in the eighteenth century, the Church of Scotland officially authorized eight different confessional documents besides the Westminster Confession as teaching instruments of the church. Both the Heidelberg Catechism and the Second Helvetic Confession have long been standards for most Reformed bodies around the world. Reformed churches in America have been the exception rather than the rule with their single standard. Most Reformed churches have believed that a plurality of confessions enriches rather than compromises Reformed faith and practice.

Secondly, there is a theological reason for a book of confessions. We have just discussed the reasons why Reformed Christians cannot recognize any one confession as a final, infallible encapsulation of true Christian faith and life for all Christians, everywhere, now and forever. A book of confessions that includes some classical Reformed confessions and leaves room for new confessions makes unmistakably clear one of the most distinctive marks of the Reformed tradition.

B. *Why This Book of Confessions*

The most immediate explanation for the content of the *Book of Confessions* is that it is the result of the combination of doctrinal standards that came with Presbyterian reunion in 1983. This amounted to adding the Larger Catechism from the three Westminster documents that were standards in the former Presbyterian Church in the United States to the *Book of Confessions* already adopted by the former United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

But the question remains, why this selection from the great number of authentic Reformed confessions that could have been chosen? The answer is that the *Book of Confessions* contains a cross-section of ecumenical and Reformed confessions with wide geographical and historical representation.

The Nicene and Apostles' Creeds from the ancient church come as close as any other confessional statements to expressing the faith of all Christians, of all tradi-

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tions, throughout church history. Their inclusion points to the ecumenical character of our church.

The Scots Confession (1560) was written mostly by John Knox, student of Calvin and father of English-speaking Reformed Christianity.

The German Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and the Swiss Second Helvetic Confession (1566) are, as we have noted, probably the two most widely accepted confessional statements among Reformed Christians throughout the world.

The originally British Westminster Confession and Catechisms (1647) have been the primary standard for the Presbyterian branch of the Reformed family not only in our country but wherever Presbyterian Churches have sent missionaries.

The Barmen Declaration (1933), written by Lutheran and Reformed Christians working together (and thus another ecumenical document), confesses the lordship of Christ especially in relation to political issues that are critical for all Christians in the modern world.

The Confession of 1967, the only specifically American confession in the book, addresses critical issues of Christian faithfulness in our time and place.

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.

C. *The Relation of the Confessions in the Book to Each Other*

There is both unity and diversity in the theological and ethical teachings of the various confessions in the book.

1. *Unity*

Comparison of the individual confessions in the book with each other reveals an easily recognizable fundamental agreement among them:

- a. All the confessions in the book share the same convictions about Jesus Christ as the one truly human and truly divine Mediator, Lord, and Savior.
- b. All explicitly or implicitly confess the doctrine of the Trinity.
- c. All the specifically Reformed confessions acknowledge the unique authority of Scripture and agree on principles for the right interpretation of Scripture.
- d. All the Reformed confessions assume or articulate the conviction that the Holy Spirit is the source of all right interpretation of Scripture and true Christian faith and life.
- e. All the Reformed confessions have the same theology concerning the true preaching of the Word and right administration of the Sacraments.

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f. All the Reformed confessions emphasize God's sovereign claim on both personal and corporate life, and thankful human obedience to it. (All the catechisms contain expositions of the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer.)

g. With the exception of the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, comparison of any of these confessions with the confessional literature of other Christian traditions clearly reveals the same distinctively Reformed understanding of Christian faith and life.

2. *Differences*

There are of course differences in style, purpose, and sometimes content among confessions written by different people directed to the problems and issues of different situations and shaped by the patterns of thought of different periods of history.

The most obvious differences are differences in form. The Apostles' Creed is a very brief summary of Christian faith in general. The Scots, Second Helvetic, and Westminster Confessions are extended theological discussions that cover all or most of the main elements of Reformed faith in particular. The Nicene Creed, Barmen Declaration, and Confession of 1967 concentrate on a few major critical issues without intending to be comprehensive. The Heidelberg and the two Westminster Catechisms are written in question and answer form for the sake of the Christian education of children and adults. The Westminster documents and the Confession of 1967 differ from all the other confessions in the book in confessing our faith mostly in objective language rather than in terms of what "I" or "we" believe. So long as there is no expectation for any confession to serve purposes for which it was not written, these differences are not confusing or disturbing but can only help the church as it uses different confessions in the book to meet different needs.

But there are also differences, even apparent contradictions, in theological and ethical content that are more difficult to deal with. Without attempting to be exhaustive, the following point to some of the more important of them:

a. The sixteenth and seventeenth century confessions, most notably the Scots, contain an anti-Roman Catholic polemic that would be unfair and inappropriate in contemporary confessions.

b. The classical confessions show little interest in the mission of the church in the world, seeming to imply that the church's task is exhausted in worship, preaching, and Sacraments. Barmen and the Confession of 1967 reflect the awareness of the church in our time that the church does not exist for itself but for the sake of mission.

c. The doctrine of "double predestination" in Chapter III of the Westminster Confession is not taught in the doctrine of election in Chapter VIII of the Scots Confession, or in Chapter X of the Second Helvetic Confession. The Heidelberg Catechism has no explicit doctrine of predestination at all.

d. With the exception of Chapter II of the Second Helvetic Confession, the classical confessions were not concerned with the historical interpretation of

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Scripture, whereas the contemporary Confession of 1967 of necessity deals with this issue.

e. Chapter XXV of the Scots Confession and Chapter XX of the Second Helvetic Confession reflect the sixteenth century view that women should not be allowed to preach or administer the Sacraments. Contemporary confessions do not express this view, and the present Form of Government precludes it.

f. Chapter XVIII of the Scots Confession, 8.11 of the Declaration of Barmen and 9.27 of the Confession of 1967 have a Christocentric understanding of the authority of Scripture, holding that Scripture is to be understood as witness to Jesus Christ. This Christocentric emphasis is missing in Chapters I and II of the Second Helvetic Confession and in Chapter I of the Westminster Confession.

g. Speaking or praying in “tongues” is forbidden in Chapter XXII of the Second Helvetic Confession and in Chapter XXIII (XXI) of the Westminster Confession, but not in the other confessions of the book.

h. Some issues that in the confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were important enough to be issues of fundamental Christian faithfulness seem relatively unimportant in our time—for instance the observance of canonical hours or the choice of food in fasting (Second Helvetic Confession) or the taking of oaths and vows (Westminster Confession).

3. *Dealing with the Differences*

Presbyterians who expect one right answer to every theological and ethical question are especially confused and deeply disturbed by these differences. (“What then does our church believe?”) But the differences also puzzle others who understand that there is room for variety within the fundamental unity of the church. It is therefore important that agreement be reached on some guidelines for dealing with divergences among the confessions. Following are some suggestions based on the theology of the confessions themselves:

a. Differences should not be exaggerated but should be understood and evaluated in light of the Christological and Trinitarian faith shared in common by all the confessions.

b. Differences should be judged central or peripheral, critical or relatively unimportant, in light of the confessions’ common Christological and Trinitarian faith, and in consideration of the most pressing problems and needs that confront the church in our time.

c. Where there are conflicts, decision in favor of one or another alternative—or in favor of a totally new alternative—should be sought by subjection of all confessional statements to possible correction in light of fresh reading of Scripture.

d. In light of the confessions’ acknowledgment of their own fallibility, differences between them should be understood and evaluated with consideration of the scientific limitations, cultural influences, and theological language and style of the particular time in which they were written.

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e. Both Scripture and the confessions teach us to have confidence in the Holy Spirit's continuing guidance of the church through the centuries as the Spirit enables the church to hear the Word of God through Scripture in every new time and situation. Therefore when there are differences between the confessions, initial priority should be given to contemporary confessions. This is only initial preference because further reflection may reveal that at some points the church in earlier times was more able and willing to be guided by the Spirit than the contemporary church.

f. The confessions are the church's confessions. Therefore when a governing body of the church has ruled in favor of one over another alternative in the confessions, the consensus of the whole church should take precedence over the opinions of individual church members or groups of church members. Because individual members or groups who disagree with the consensus of the church sometimes may have a better understanding of Scripture and be more open to the guidance of the Spirit than the church as a whole, the church should listen to them respectfully, with openness to be reformed by them. But until such time as the church as a whole is convinced that it should change its position, its interpretation of the confessions should be considered authoritative.

g. So long as the church as a whole has not taken a stand on differences among the confessions, its ministers and officers should have the freedom to choose the confessional interpretation that they believe best reflects the witness of Scripture.

h. When there is no real consensus in the church, differences among the confessions should ordinarily be allowed to stand until such time as a genuine consensus is possible and necessary. Even if a bare majority were able to defeat a very large minority in voting for one option in preference to another, it would ordinarily be premature and dishonest for the church to claim, "This is what we Presbyterians believe."

D. *The Book of Confessions and Ordination*

The church does not require acceptance of the church's confessions for church membership. All who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are welcome to join and participate in fellowship. But to ensure that those who lead the church do so in faithfulness to its doctrine and form of government, the church does require ordained ministers, elders, and deacons to declare their adherence to the confessions of the church. In order to understand what they commit themselves to when they do this, it is important to note the sequence of questions asked at ordination and the precise wording of the third question. The first five questions are:

a. Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

b. Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal, and God's word to you?

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c. 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?

d. Will you fulfill your office in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?

e. Will you be governed by our church's polity, and will you abide by its discipline? Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God's Word and Spirit?

These questions are very carefully worded to preserve in the church the same understanding of the authority of confessions characteristic of the Reformed tradition in general. That is, they seek to protect both freedom and variety in the church and the authority and unity of the church. The following two sections of this paper must therefore be held closely together.

1. *Freedom and Variety in the Church*

The same freedom and variety that is characteristic of the Reformed tradition in general is expressed in the questions asked of candidates for ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

a. Ordained persons are asked to acknowledge the *Book of Confessions* as “authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do.” These words limit the authority of the book by making its authority subordinate to the higher authority of Scripture—which in turn (according to the first two questions) derives its authority from its witness to the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ who alone has the right to claim absolute and unqualified loyalty and obedience.

b. Ordained persons are required to be “instructed and led” and “continually guided” by the church's confessions. These words demand study of the confessions. They also provide freedom from a demand for unqualified assent to everything the confessions ask us to think, say, and do and freedom from a legalistic interpretation of the confessions.

c. Since 1983 ordained persons are asked to receive and adopt the “essential tenets” of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions. 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. That this is indeed the purpose of the phrase is made clear by the fact that both the former United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and Presbyterian Church in the U.S. repeatedly answered in the negative overtures requesting that the church make a precise list of a few fundamental doctrines (once called “essential and necessary articles of faith”) that must be accepted by ordained officers. Moreover, while Chapter II of the Form of Government lists a number of general theological affirmations to summarize the broad general character of Presbyterian faith and life,

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it too prescribes no specific understanding of any of these affirmations to test the acceptability of people for ordained office in the church.

The ordination question that asks for commitment to the “essential tenets” of the confessions brings freedom in the church at several levels. Ordained persons are free to be “instructed,” “led,” and “continually guided” by the confessions without being forced to subscribe to any precisely worded articles of faith drawn up either by the General Assembly or by a presbytery. (Presbyteries, too, are bound to the constitutional language that excludes demand for adherence to any specifically worded interpretations of a few selected doctrines. In a presbytery the decision for ordination is always determined by the concrete encounter between the presbytery and the candidate.) Presbyteries (in the case of ministers) and church sessions (in the case of elders and deacons) are free to decide for themselves what acceptable loyalty to the confessions means in their particular situation without being bound to any “check list” prescribed by higher governing bodies of the church.

2. *The Authority and Unity of the Church*

The ordination questions make room for freedom in the church but not for unlimited freedom. They also protect the authority and unity of the church:

a. To be an ordained Presbyterian is not only to acknowledge the superior authority of God in Christ as proclaimed by Scripture but also to recognize the church’s confessions as “authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do.”

While confessional standards are subordinate to the Scriptures, they are, nevertheless, standards. They are not lightly drawn up or subscribed to, nor may they be ignored or dismissed. The church is prepared to counsel with or even discipline one ordained who seriously rejects the faith expressed in the confessions (*Book of Order*, G-2.0200 [F-2.02 in the current *Book of Order*]).

b. To be an ordained Presbyterian is to promise to be “instructed,” “led,” and “continually guided” by the confessions of the church—not just by one’s personal theological and ethical preferences or even by one’s own personal understanding of God or Jesus Christ or Scripture. The church should not “bind the conscience” of those who disagree with its confessions and interpretation of their meaning. When an individual or group of individuals disagree with the consensus of the church, the church must first examine itself to see whether it needs to reform its confessional stance. Nevertheless, in the Presbyterian Church the consensus of the church concerning the meaning of faith and life takes precedence over the opinions and preferences of individuals and groups in the church, and may lead to the refusal of ordination to those who disagree with the church.

c. To be an ordained Presbyterian is to acknowledge the authority of each individual confession in the *Book of Confessions* and the book as a whole, not just the authority of selected sections from the confessions or the authority of one or another preferred confession in the book. While reception and adoption of the *Book*

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of Confessions means freedom from the imposition of a list of specific doctrinal formulations, it does not mean freedom to select from the book whatever an individual or group in the church chooses. An appropriate governing body as a whole may decide that some statements in the confessions are central and others peripheral, some no longer authoritative and others still authoritative for the church in our place and time. It may decide that there is or is not room for difference in the church regarding the authority of this or that statement. But in the Presbyterian Church the decision about what is “essential and necessary” belongs not to individuals or groups in the church but to the appropriate governing body of the church as it makes decisions in particular cases.

It is important to emphasize that 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.

3. *Guidelines*

In light of the foregoing discussion of the freedom and variety and authority and unity of the church, the following guidelines may be seen as conclusions drawn from these discussions and as guidance for individuals and groups concerned with the ordination of pastors, elders, and deacons.

a. General Assemblies, synods, presbyteries, and sessions, as well as individual church officers, should be led, instructed, and continually guided by the whole *Book of Confessions*.

b. The confessions of the *Book of Confessions* are standards, in response to the historical context of the time, which are subordinate to Scripture; they are subject to criticism in light of the word of God in Jesus Christ as witnessed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and may be revised by the Church following duly prescribed procedures.

c. The confessions are serious statements and are “not to be taken lightly.” While neither the General Assembly nor any presbytery or session should demand adherence to any specific list of beliefs or doctrinal formulations as if the content of the faith could be reduced to a few selected and precisely worded statements of doctrine, General Assemblies, synods, presbyteries, and sessions have the responsibility of determining on a case by case basis whether candidates for ordination adhere to the standards of doctrine as set out in the confessions.

d. When individuals or groups in the church call into question some aspect of the confessions or of the church’s interpretation of them, those who hear that objection should consider the possibility that the dispute may point to a deficiency in present confessional standards, remembering that, indeed, synods or councils may err and that the church is always to be reformed (*sempter reformanda*). However, after due consideration, the court of jurisdiction must decide whether such objection is to be allowed to stand or is to be ruled as being out of conformity with the confessional standards of the church.

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e. Thus, when individuals or groups in the church persist in disagreeing with the confessions or the church's interpretation of them, the appropriate church body has the responsibility of determining whether the disagreement is sufficient to prevent the approval of a candidate for ordination to the office of pastor, elder, or deacon.

f. So long as presbyteries do not contradict specific interpretations of the confessions made by the General Assembly, and so long as sessions do not contradict those made by the Assembly or by their presbytery, presbyteries and sessions have the right and responsibility to interpret for themselves whether candidates for ordination and ordained persons, for whom they are responsible, hold to the "essentials" of the faith as articulated by the confessions of the church (the constitutional right of appeal being understood).

E. *Other Important Uses of the Book of Confessions in the Church*

If our church is to be a truly confessional church in the Reformed tradition, every aspect of its life must be informed and shaped by the understanding of Christian faith and life expressed in the *Book of Confessions*. Without attempting to be exhaustive in discussing them, we suggest the following areas in which the book should have the normative function the church acknowledges it to have:

1. *The church's ministry in general.* Prerequisite to faithful and responsible use of the book in every particular aspect of the church's life is its being carefully taught in the seminaries, seriously and properly used in the ordination process, and continually studied and utilized by the leaders and governing bodies of the church at all levels.

2. *Worship.* Remembering that one of the main functions of confession in the New Testament and in the ancient church was liturgical, we should seek ways to use the language of the confessions in the church's worship so that people in our congregations may make them their own confessions of faith before God and the world. Even when explicit language of the confessions would be inappropriate, their theological and ethical teachings should determine decisions about the order, forms, content, and purpose of worship.

3. *Preaching.* The task of preaching is to proclaim the God we meet in Jesus Christ through the biblical witness, not to proclaim the theology of the confessions. 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.

4. *Christian education.* After the Bible itself, the *Book of Confessions* should be a primary resource and standard of the church's responsibility to enable children, youth, new and long-time Presbyterians to understand what it means to be a Christian in the Reformed tradition, claim that tradition for themselves, and be guided by it in every area of their daily lives. If this is to happen: (a) Unordained as well as ordained teachers in the church should understand, be able to interpret, and be

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themselves committed to the Reformed faith as contained in the confessions of our church. (b) Ministers must be teachers and especially the teachers of teachers. (c) The best education theories and methods must be chosen and used in a way consistent with the Reformed tradition so that true learning and claiming of the tradition can take place and authoritarian indoctrination or brainwashing avoided. (d) The *Book of Confessions* itself should be part of the church's educational curriculum—especially in officer and teacher education, in confirmation instruction, and in adult church school classes. (e) All curriculum material need not be informed by the Reformed tradition, but all curriculum material should be continually evaluated and taught in light of that tradition as expressed in the *Book of Confessions*.

5. *Pastoral care.* Faithful and effective pastoral care in our time requires ministers gratefully and diligently to use the wisdom, tools, and skills of such “secular” disciplines as psychology and sociology, and (increasingly) to be able to deal with issues raised by modern medical science and technology. If pastors are to be faithful to their ordination vows and if they are to offer people in need the distinctive resources of Christian and Reformed faith, they must continually evaluate the presuppositions, claims, methods, and goals of these disciplines in light of the theological and ethical teaching of the church's confessions. Pastors should also find guidance in the theology and language of the confessions for what they should say and do in ministering to people both in crisis situations and in situations of everyday life.

6. *Evangelism.* The theology of the confessions should shape the motives, content, methods, and goals of the church's evangelistic programs. Special care must be taken lest concern for “results” or “success” lead to evangelistic preaching and techniques that compromise either the fundamental commitment of our confessions to the gospel of salvation by God's grace alone or their emphasis on costly Christian discipleship in every area of life.

7. *Mission.* The church must continually evaluate its mission programs, strategies and goals to be sure that they are determined by the theology and ethics of its confessions and not by this or that liberal, conservative, or revolutionary ideology or by the cultural or racial preferences of the leaders and members of the church.

8. *Administration.* Governing bodies of the church and church leaders properly seek the most efficient styles of leadership, management, decision-making, and priority and goal-setting. But all administrative and operational processes and goals should be measured by the confessional standards of the church and choices determined by the “essential tenets of the Reformed faith” expressed in them.

Our church will have become a truly confessional church when we no longer have to remind ourselves to test what we think and say and do by reference to the *Book of Confessions*, but when we do so automatically, and when it becomes so much a part of us that we are always unconsciously guided by our commitment to the Reformed tradition it expresses and serves.