

“A Brief Statement of Faith”
Jeremiah 17:5-8; 2 Corinthians 13:5-13;
Mark 13:32-37

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If you were to write a confession—not a confession of what you’ve done wrong, but a confession of faith—what would you put in there? Would you want to take time to look back at the other confessions to see what kinds of things those confessions had listed, to see if they gave you any ideas that you might have forgotten and you felt were important? Or would you just start from your experience and think about what you have experienced of God’s love, starting your confession there? Or maybe it would be influenced by the context in which we live. Your confession might be shaped by our present context.

As we think about this idea of writing a confession, I think it’s useful to think about how, from time to time, it might be a good idea to write out a confession of faith, to think about what we believe, what I believe. When I invite people to join the church, there comes a point when we look at the confessions briefly and I suggest that it’s a good thing to write your own confession and to think about what would be included in that confession of faith.

In a way, that’s what the Brief Confession of Faith is about. It is the church thinking about what it needs to confess about its faith. Now, it came at a particular time. It came when the southern branch of the Presbyterian Church and the northern branch of the Presbyterian Church were finally coming back together in about 1983. They split during the Civil War. It was a good length of time before they could finally get back together. One of the things in the Declaration of Union was the idea of writing a new, brief reformed confession of faith for the church to consider putting into the Book of Confessions. In 1983 the moderator of the church at that time was a man named Taylor, who was President of the San Francisco Theological Seminary. He called Jack Stotts in Chicago, who was the President of McCormick Theological Seminary, and asked him to lead a committee of fifteen to begin to write this confession.

A personal aside: I was at seminary in Chicago from 1981-83, so just before Jack Stotts got that call, I was taking a class from him. I can tell you Jack Stotts is one of my heroes of faith. He was kind. He was faithful. He was smart, and someone you enjoyed being with. He was able to lead this committee of fifteen for the next seven years, meeting three or four times a year for many hours, going through this step by step to write a brief confession.

It seems like it took a long time. It took seven years in the writing, then it came to General Assembly, and General Assembly decided they wanted to have an editing committee look at it. It took another year for that editing committee to do its work. The following year the Confession came back to General Assembly and after a lot of nail-biting they voted for it. It went to the Presbyteries and finally came back in 1991 and was voted into the Book of Confessions.

It may seem like a long time. It's interesting, Blaise Pascal, writing in 1656 or 57 to a friend, said, "I'm sorry this letter is so long. If I had had more time, it would be brief." It feels a little bit that way with this confession. They took their time to make it brief, but in doing so, almost every line, every word, every punctuation mark, meant something for the people putting it together. It became a confession of a united church in a particular time.

They had looked back at other confessions and were beginning to try to understand. In fact, the first line—"In life and death"—is a reflection of the Heidelberg Catechism. So they looked at where we've come from as they began to put this together, but they wanted to also be very scriptural. The benediction that we read out of Corinthians today, — "The grace of Christ, the love of God, the community of the Holy Spirit"— they wanted that to be the shape of the confession itself. So as we look at the confession, it takes that shape. It starts with Jesus and goes through the Trinity. Jesus, God, Holy Spirit.

What they did as they began to put it together was to take the person of Jesus, then the person of God, then the person of the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, and thought about what we generally associate with them. For Jesus, it was preaching, teaching, healing, breaking conventions, forgiving, calling to repentance, breaking the power of sin and death, and deliverance. They went through those steps in thinking about who Jesus was.

When they went to God, they began to think of God as a loving parent. "Abba, Father" is what they start with. "Abba" is an endearing phrase, like saying "Daddy" or "Papa." In spite of that, this is where they put the human struggle. The human struggle is with the very love of God that God has given us as we get interested in other things. God made us male and female, equal in value. This confession recognizes that, going back to Galatians where it says "In Christ there is not slave or free, male or female, Jew or Greek." It notes that instead of basking in that love of the parent, we rebel and hide. If you think about the story in Genesis, they rebel by eating the fruit and then they hide from God. They felt like that was a little broader experience for us. Some of us recognize our rebellion and some of us recognize how we hide from God. In doing so, here's where they place human sin, rebelling from God.

The Confession talks about "accepting lies as truth, exploiting neighbor and nature, threatening death to the whole planet and thus deserving God's condemnation." But in God's justice and mercy, God tries again to come to us. The interesting thing about that statement is that when they talk about God's justice and mercy, it's what causes God to enable redemption. I think about what human justice does. Often the only thing I associate with human justice is punishment. To bring somebody to justice means punishment. In God's justice and mercy, it means redemption. Wow!

In that redemption, what God wants again is to be in covenant with us, that is, to be in relationship. That's the biblical term for being in relationship. It talks about God being in relationship with us as a mother who nurses her child or a father who embraces his son. So there's that section on who God is, the loving, embracing one.

The love of God enables Jesus to come and bring us deliverance and the idea, then, is that Jesus is the one who opens the door. Then we get to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one who enables us to move from that door into life. The Holy Spirit is the one that is everywhere the giver and renewer of life. It talks about justifying, freeing, binding, inspiring, engaging, claiming, feeds us, calling men and women together into ministry. So the confession goes through this series, the Trinity, and thinks about the way we see each person of the Trinity active, the dynamic nature of each one.

In that piece on the Holy Spirit where it says men and women are called into ministry, that was a statement that recognized that both men and women could be ordained. It hadn't been that long ago, in 1956, that Margaret Towner was the first woman ordained in the Presbyterian Church. I think what it is suggesting is that when the Holy Spirit is at work it makes real differences. The work of the Holy Spirit made a real difference in Margaret's life. The church's change meant that she could become an ordained clergyperson in 1956. This change has opened the ministry to women and men in a new way. The Spirit continues to work, and as it works in our lives it works in practical ways, in ways that we see shaped in the actual interactions that we have with one another.

The Confession offers the following about the Spirit: "We know that in a broken and fearful world, the Spirit brings us courage—courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all people to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in the church and in the culture, to hear the voices of people long-silenced, and to work for the justice and freedom and peace." Short paragraphs; lots to ponder.

Take the idea of the Spirit bringing courage that we can pray and work together. I think what they are summarizing there, or they are actually expanding on, is something from Psalm 34:14: "Depart evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it." In opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit, that happens. I'm always a little hesitant to leave something like "depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it" because it's so general but it makes me think about an interaction I've had with someone when I feel like I have overstepped my bounds and created a problem. If I think about what it means to seek and pursue peace, it's noticing how I have breached that approach and thinking about how I could do things differently. How did what I do cause the problem? Instead I could step back and think about how to rephrase it, how to enter into that conversation in a different way so that as I seek peace and pursue it, it's a real thing and not just some words.

So as we are given the gift of this particular Brief Statement of Faith, it ends with a bit about thinking forward, about noticing what's going on around us. I love the fact that it says even though we notice things changing and getting better, we're not claiming that's the Kingdom of God, nor when things are bad, we're not going to say that it's all over. We're going to stay focused on the good God calls us to be, the grace God has given us, doing justice and bringing peace so that at the very end we can say, "Come, Lord Jesus."

It feels like what this confession is reminding us of is who we believe in and what that God cares about. What are we paying attention to? There's that one phrase in there, "that we can unmask idolatries in the church and society." What are we paying attention to? Are we staying awake to what Christ is calling us to be? What God wants? To depart from evil and do good? To seek peace and pursue it?

If Jesus walked in the door, would I be happy to see him or cringing? It's an invitation to again remember that God has brought us one who brings us into good relationship with him, overcomes our rebellion and brings us to the table, brings us into the family of faith, and invites us, then, to follow him, to depart from evil and do good.

It's a wonderful thing to think about in coming to the table because there's an injunction in scripture that invites us to try to cleanse ourselves before we come. To recognize the struggles we might have, try to right them, and then come. And to come as a people who recognize it's God's grace that enables us to come around the table and that makes us into a people, that makes us into a community of faith, that makes us into something that we can't be on our own. Not only does it invite us to ask the question individually, but corporately as a body. Are we ready to say, "Come, Lord Jesus. Come." Amen.