

We Believe – Intro to Creeds
1 Corinthians 15: 1-8
Don Lincoln

Back in the 1960's and 1970's when some of us were alive, many Christian denominations were wrestling with similar issues – interpretation of Scripture and ordination of women being primary among them. The Missouri Synod Lutheran Church was debating both issues, as well as whether or not to allow non-Missouri-Synod-Lutherans to join them at the Lord's Supper. One of my good friends was Missouri Synod, so I knew what his church was going through.

This was particularly memorable for me as their discussion about the interpretation of scripture focused on the story of Jonah and the Whale in the Bible. Was it a literal, true story? Was there an historical Jonah, swallowed by a great fish? Some said there wasn't a Jonah, or a whale, but it was a moral story from which all could profit. Others insisted it was historical truth. The language seems poetic at times; and historical at others. Some argued whales couldn't swallow a person whole anyway. The Missouri Synod held to the historical view; which is still posted on their website today.

Jump forward 50 years. You can't see it, but I'm wearing a tie with whales on it. Wore it last Sunday too. In honor of 56 year-old lobster diver Michael Packard, who was swallowed by a whale off Cape Cod the week before last, and lived to tell about it. While he wasn't three days in the whale like Jonah – it sure must've felt like it. Packard said, "I was completely inside; it was completely black. I thought to myself, 'there's no way I'm getting out of here. I'm done, I'm dead.' And then, like Jonah, the whale spit him out.

If Michael Packard was a Missouri Synod Lutheran, he'd say "I believe!!!"

I believe. We believe. CREDO. The Latin word from which that phrase comes. "I believe" – that starts the Apostle's and Nicene Creeds, the first two faith statements in The Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Our series begins!

Our Book of Confessions contains twelve creeds, confessions, catechisms, or declarations, ranging from the Apostle's Creed around 180AD – all the way to the Belhar Confession, adopted by the PCUSA in 2016.

Some people are confused by talk of "confessions." Inside and outside the church confession is often associated with admitting wrongdoing: criminals "confess" they committed a crime; famous people write "true confessions" about scandalous lives; people visit a "confessional" to admit sin.

But historically, confession in the Christian tradition has an earlier, much more positive sense. To confess means to affirm, to declare, to acknowledge or take a stand for what one believes to be true. When Christians make a confession, they say, “This is what I or we most assuredly believe, regardless of what others may believe and regardless of opposition, rejection, or persecution that may come to us for taking this stand.”

The earliest Christian confession contained in scripture was very simple: “Jesus is Lord.” The 2nd Chapter of Philippians – Jesus is Lord. That statement is not so much about dogma or doctrine – it’s about testimony! It’s about Proclamation! This I believe – Jesus is LORD! Unpacking that – filling in what that might mean to an individual or a community of faith has certainly developed longer, more complex and much wordier confessions of faith – but at its heart, a confession or creed is still essentially proclamation.

Some of you will remember the opening of the Heidelberg Catechism, which we studied a few years ago. It opens with this glorious proclamation:

“What is your only comfort in life and in death?”

That I am not my own, but belong — body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.” (Hard for me to say as it was the Proclamation at the beginning of both of my parents’ funerals.) What a CONFESSION! “In life and in death I belong to my faithful Savior.”

Today’s Scripture lesson was written to the Corinthian church, a church struggling because of several factors: the pagan background of many of its members; the influence of Greek philosophical traditions; and diverse social statuses within the Christian Community.

The Apostle Paul heard reports of issues in the Corinthian Church, but in verse 12 of the 15th chapter he reports a real crisis: “Some of you say there is no resurrection from the dead.”

So Paul writes, “Let me remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news I proclaimed to you, which you received, in which you stand – what **I believe** – what **you believe** – what **WE BELIEVE**.”

Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and appeared to a boatload of people, and finally to me!! This is the authoritative tradition I have received and have passed on to you. My proclamation; your proclamation; **our** proclamation.”

Paul wants to make certain the Corinthians understand **who they are** and **where they are** in God’s history. And central to that understanding is that Christianity is good news about an event which happened in the world – Jesus’ resurrection – an event because of which the world can never be the same again. And those who believe and live by it will never be the same again either.¹

Like the crisis in the Corinthian Church – or maybe Michael Paddock’s anxious moment in the belly of a whale – throughout history church leaders have crafted statements of faith when they feel they must. These may result from an urgent need to correct some distortion of the gospel’s truth that threatens the integrity of the church’s faith and life from **inside** the church – from in its own membership; from congregations within its fellowship.

OR they may result from some political or cultural movement **outside** the church that openly attacks or subtly seeks to compromise the church’s commitment to the gospel. **OR**, sometimes the urgency to confess comes from the church’s conviction it has a great new insight into the promises and/or demands of the gospel, desperately needed in a particular time and place by both the church and world.

It’s not uncommon for all three occasions – internal danger, external threat, and great opportunity – to be behind the 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, or success.

Some of you in the room know that there are two groups within **this congregation** that have just begun working on statements for Westminster’s leaders to consider – one with regard to racial equity, and the other about this congregation’s affirming welcome to membership, marriage and leadership, all persons, regardless of age, ethnicity, race, color, abilities, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation or gender identity. **Statements that we believe**, that we feel compelled to consider making – in light of both the climate and opportunity of this season.

So – a quick summary of our Book of Confessions. First – the ancient creeds – Nicene and Apostles – were the primary affirmations of the early church, written as Christians realized they needed to say a little more to the world than simply “Jesus is Lord.” Both those creeds center on the person and work of Jesus Christ. We did a series on the Apostles Creed six years ago.

Three of our confessions – the **Scots, Second Helvetic, and Westminster** – and all three of our catechisms – the **Heidelberg** and the **Westminster Shorter and Larger** – developed out of conflicts in the 16th and 17th centuries as the Protestant Reformation was unfolding and Protestants were wrestling amongst themselves – the Anabaptists, the Church of England – as well as wrestling with Roman Catholicism’s medieval heritage. While based on the ancient creeds, these are lengthier treatises applying in detail to new religious and cultural situations in the church. We did a series on the Heidelberg Catechism in 2017. We will study both the **Scots** and **Second Helvetic** Confessions in this series.

And then it was 400 years until the church picked up another confession of faith. These several that came along in the 20th Century were in response to either a threat to its existence, or some great injustice in the world. The **Theological Declaration of Barmen** was a protest of the Confessing Church in Germany against the Nazi

government's attempt to control the church for political purposes. **The Confession of 1967** came from the Presbyterian church in the United States speaking out against racial discrimination, war, and poverty – and having seen the globe for the first time from space, our concerns for Mother Earth.

The newest – the **Belhar Confession**, from the Reformed Church in South Africa – denounced Apartheid. We will look at all three of those statements in this series.

While the ancient creeds – Nicene and Apostle's – are simple and essential declarations of faith which have stood the test of time – the later confessions clearly bear the imprint of the history and the culture in which they were written. They are not perfect replicas of biblical truth that could never be improved. New confessions could be and have been written that would correct some of the errors of their predecessors.

For instance, the one remaining statement we will study, **A Brief Statement of Faith**, written in 1983 when Presbyterians north and south – (our denomination split at the Civil War and couldn't get back together with brothers and sisters for 122 years) – that statement among a whole lot of other things corrects the limitations on women in leadership that's described in the Scots Confession and the 2nd Helvetic affirming that women can serve.

The authors of our confessions and creeds were courageous Christians who put their understanding of God's Word and will into writing. Our task is not to enshrine their words as infallible and unchangeable. Our task is rather to show the same courage as we seek to interpret Scripture and apply it to our lives. The confessions will help us see how faithful Christians have done that in the past so that we can consider how to do that in our own time and context.²

One of the questions asked of deacons, elders and pastors in the Presbyterian Church at their ordination is this:

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, do you and will you? ***I do and I will.***

I pray that this will be a meaningful and enriching exploration of the Church's proclamation over the centuries; but even more that it might enhance **OUR** faith and our witness in the world. May it be so. AMEN

1. NT Wright, Paul for Everyone, Commentary on 1 Corinthians 15.
2. Steve Shussett; Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding, PCUSA 2012