

Looking back, looking forward

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Thank you for the invitation to contribute an American Presbyterian testimony to your discussion. I am a member of the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America, the PC(USA), and for a little over 50 years now we have had a Book of Confessions, which includes the Westminster standards but augments them with both older and newer confessional documents. I am also a professor of doctrinal theology who has taught Presbyterian Heritage to seminary students for almost 30 years, and I have come across the ocean to tell you that having a Book of Confessions works! My students, many of them future pastors, come away with a deeper and richer understanding of their Presbyterian identity than they would have by studying the Westminster standards alone.

I will first describe the current PC(USA) Book of Confessions,¹ then give an account of how we got to the point of adopting it, and finish by giving examples of its benefits to American Presbyterians.

Our Book of Confessions includes two ancient ecumenical creeds, the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed. It includes three Reformation-era documents, all written in the 1560s: the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Second Helvetic Confession. It includes the Westminster Confession and both the Shorter and Larger Catechisms. Finally, it includes four twentieth-century documents: the Barmen Declaration from 1930s Germany, the American Presbyterian Confession of 1967, A Brief Statement of Faith, marking the reunion of northern and southern American Presbyterians in 1983, and, most recently the Confession of Belhar from South Africa (1986).

A few things to note about our Book of Confessions. First, it is not accurate to say that it *replaces* the Westminster standards, which would suggest that Westminster no longer has theological authority for the church. Rather, the Book of Confessions *augments* the Westminster, setting it in a larger confessional context. The Westminster standards become part of a larger Reformed chorus, a chorus that was there from the beginnings of Reformed Protestantism and that embraces both theological harmonies and dissonances. When I teach our Book of

¹ All citations in this paper are from *Book of Confessions* [Part I of *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*], Study Edition (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).

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Confessions, I take a two-pronged approach. We study the confessions diachronically, seeking to understand each document in its particular historical context. But we also study them synchronically, looking for continuities and developments in their theological witness. Does placing other confessional documents alongside the Westminster standards relativize their authority? Yes, to some degree. But surely that is appropriate for what we Presbyterians refer to as ‘subordinate standards’, standards that are subordinate to the authority of Scripture. As the Westminster Confession itself notes, the deliverances of church councils are fallible and therefore are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but are to be used as a help in both (BoC 6.175). Having a chorus of confessional witnesses helps Presbyterians resist the temptation to confuse faithfulness to Scripture with adherence to the Westminster. The Westminster Confession has been a dominant voice in Presbyterian life, but both historically and theologically it belongs to a larger chorus.

Second, by reaching backwards as well as forwards, the PC(USA) Book of Confessions avoids a supersessionist mentality. Later confessions do not supersede earlier ones – they accompany them. Confessions are not like computer operating systems or washing-up soap, where a ‘new and improved’ formula means we can discard the old. Indeed, the Book of Confessions encourages American Presbyterians to claim the ecumenical breadth of their theological heritage by reaching all the way back to the creeds of the early church. It also encourages them to acknowledge their roots in the sixteenth-century German, Swiss, and Scottish Reformation movements. If Presbyterian theology does not end with the Westminster standards, it does not start there either. Retaining the confessional authority of earlier texts reminds us that every age has its preoccupations and its blind spots. We find it easier to see these in texts from other times and places, but we have preoccupations and blind spots too, and that is all the more reason to let these earlier texts continue to challenge and broaden our theological perspective. My students, for example, are surprised by the Scots Confession’s insistence that repressing tyranny and defending the oppressed are some of the good works that are pleasing to God (BoC 3.14). Their understanding of the creedal language of Christ’s descent into hell is broadened by the Heidelberg Catechism’s explication: ‘That in my severest tribulations I may be assured that Christ my Lord has redeemed me from hellish anxieties and torment by the unspeakable anguish, pains, and terrors which he suffered in his soul both on the cross and before’ (BoC 4.044). They are challenged by the bodily and communal vision of heaven in the Westminster Larger Catechism: That the righteous will be ‘made perfectly holy and happy both in body and soul, in the company of innumerable saints and angels, but especially in the immediate vision



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and fruition of God the Father, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, to all eternity' (BoC 7.200).

Third, only two out of our twelve confessional documents have their origin in the United States, namely the Confession of 1967 and the Brief Statement of Faith. All the rest come from other parts of the Reformed world and the larger church. This is important for keeping the American Presbyterian church from becoming parochial and isolated from its larger history and from its global neighbours. While I could easily imagine Scottish Presbyterians deciding to add the Scots Confession or the Communion Catechism of John Craig to their confessional standards, I hope that they would also reclaim their long history with other texts from beyond the United Kingdom, like the Geneva and Heidelberg Catechisms.

Fourth, the PC(USA) Book of Confessions is a book without a back cover. Though it is an arduous, multi-year process, adding a confessional standard is possible. Our most recent example is the South African Confession of Belhar, adopted in 2014. What lacking a back cover means theologically is that while the canon of Scripture is closed, we are never done confessing our faith. We can never assume that the church in our time or in any other time has said all that needs to be said in response to the gospel of Jesus Christ. In our confessional life we are to continue to seek the illumination of the Holy Spirit in an attitude of repentance and humility. As the Confession of 1967 states, 'The church, guided by the Spirit, humbled by its own complicity and instructed by all attainable knowledge, seeks to discern the will of God and learn how to obey in these concrete situations' (BoC 9.43). Every confession of faith is fallible, and thus it is dangerous to elevate one confession beyond criticism. Every confession is time-bound, and thus it is wrong to assume that one confession is adequate to guide the church in matters which it could not have foreseen. The Confession of Belhar, for example, written during the South African struggle against apartheid, speaks in a way the Westminster simply cannot to the American church's sorry history of racial exclusion and exploitation. And in doing so it deepens our church's theological understanding of what reconciliation in Christ means.

Now that I have briefly described the PC(USA) Book of Confessions, I will give an account of how we got to the point of adopting it.

We American Presbyterians inherited our devotion to the Westminster standards from you, and perhaps that means that you also bear some responsibility for all the problems the standards have caused us over the centuries. Almost from the beginning, American Presbyterians have found the Westminster standards both central to our theological identity and remarkably hard to live with. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has come to adopt a Book of Confessions the hard way, by exhausting all the other alternatives. We have tried three main

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alternatives, sometimes in combination, and they will sound familiar to you. First, starting already in the colonial period, we have softened what subscription to the Westminster standards means. Early on we permitted theological scruples with the Westminster, leaving it to judicatories to decide whether they were substantive. Second, throughout our history we have continually revised the text of the Confession. Sometimes we have changed it directly by various deletions and additions. Sometimes we have added Declaratory Statements that purport to clarify the original text but actually seem to create more theological confusion. Third, some American Presbyterian bodies have simply abandoned the Westminster standards outright, sometimes in the process also abandoning Presbyterianism altogether.

The PC(USA)'s Book of Confessions got its start in the 1958 reunion of two branches of the northern Presbyterian church (UPCNA and PCUSA joined to become UPCUSA). To commemorate their reunion, a committee was charged to draw up a new confession (what became the Confession of 1967). The committee, chaired by Edward Dowey of Princeton, decided to embed that new confession in a Book of Confessions. Twenty-five years later, when the northern and southern branches of the Presbyterian Church reunited in 1983, the Longer Westminster Catechism and a new Brief Statement of Faith were added to the original Book of Confessions. Five years ago, the Confession of Belhar was also added. The decision to create a Book of Confessions took place against the backdrop of two hundred and fifty years of varied and ultimately unsuccessful Presbyterian attempts to live with the Westminster as its sole confessional standard. As you know, Presbyterians tend to be a fissiparous bunch – I sometimes refer to American Presbyterians as the split peas – and an inordinate number of our splits have been related to the Westminster standards. That tragic reality continues. The decision to embrace a Book of Confessions that included the Westminster aggravated existing divisions with other American Presbyterians who continue to retain the Westminster as their sole confessional standard.

Behind the attempts to soften subscription, revise the text, and even abandon the Westminster standards completely were a cluster of theological problems American Presbyterians had with the Westminster Confession. They will no doubt also sound familiar to you, for you have experienced many of them yourselves.

Some of our earliest theological struggles with the Westminster standards concerned what Chapters 20 and 23 say about the relation between church and state. The Westminster Assembly, convened by the English Parliament during a civil war, hoped for a civil and religious union of England, Scotland and Ireland. Not surprisingly, then, the Westminster Confession promulgates a very close coordination between church government and civil government, ascribing to the

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civil magistrate the power to act against those who maintain erroneous religious opinions and practices, and to be present at church synods in order that ‘all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed’. This was simply an unworkable arrangement in the American colonies, where Presbyterians were one religious group among many others. By 1729, decades before the establishment of the new American nation, Westminster Chapter 23 undergoes significant alterations by American Presbyterians. In the revised version, it is the duty of the civil magistrate to refrain from giving ‘preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest’, with the goal that ‘all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger.’ When it comes to matters of religion, the role of magistrates is ‘to protect the person and good name of *all* their people’ (BoC 6.129). Even American Presbyterians who retain the Westminster as their sole confessional standard have adopted this revision. This revision is sometimes regarded as not being of any theological substance, but that is incorrect. This is not just a minor polity adjustment: it is a thinking through of the theological implications of the Westminster’s own insistence that ‘God alone is Lord of the conscience’ (BoC 6.109).

Another source of division among American Presbyterians during the eighteenth century was over the compatibility of Westminster theology with an emphasis on revivalism. In a context of inadequate ecclesial infrastructure and broad Protestant collaboration, revivals were a recurrent feature of American Christianity. Some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Presbyterians rejected revivalism on the grounds that it was incompatible with Westminster theology. Others rejected the Westminster on the grounds that it impeded revival. Still others, such as Gilbert Tennent, claimed the two were compatible.

By the nineteenth century, revision of the Westminster was in the air among Presbyterians in America, as it was in Scotland, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The uncompromising double predestinarianism of Chapter 3 on the decrees was at the heart of the arguments for revision. What did the Westminster’s assurances about elect infants imply about the fate of other infants? (BoC 6.066). How could one square the tremendous resources and energy Presbyterians were devoting to mission and evangelism with a confession that had no chapter on the Holy Spirit and confined salvation to a certain and definite number chosen from eternity? Didn’t Christ’s Great Commission require an affirmation of God’s love for all? Westminster’s assertion of a biblical text ‘immediately inspired by God’ and ‘kept pure in all ages’ (BoC 6.008) seemed to clash with the deliverances of modern biblical criticism. Its assertion of a six-day creation seemed naïve in an era of scientific discovery. As an ecumenical age dawned, American

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Presbyterians agonized over a Confession that referred to the Pope as the Antichrist (BoC 6.145). As marriage between persons of different religious backgrounds became increasingly common, American Presbyterians grew uneasy with the Westminster's condemnation of marriage to 'Infidels, Papists or other Idolaters' (BoC 6.131).

As if all this were not enough, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the American Civil War broke out. The war divided northern Presbyterians and southern Presbyterians from each other for 120 years. During this time both the northern and southern churches continued to argue over and revise the Westminster Confession. Sometimes they made different revisions to the text, and sometimes they inserted the same additions in different places in the confession. The result is that the version of the Westminster that is currently in our Book of Confessions is a complete mess, with two different numbering systems and two slightly different texts.

Part of me would like to restore our text of the Westminster to the 1647 original. Let it stand in our Book of Confessions in its pristine glory. Give the civil magistrate the power to persecute heretics, call the Pope the Antichrist, leave non-elect infants in limbo, keep silent on the Holy Spirit and the mission of the church, condemn marriage to those deemed heretical. Doing so would represent a theological honesty about where we have been as a church, and thus about who we are as heirs of this legacy. It is an honesty we have retained in the other documents in our Book of Confessions. For example, we have retained the Scots Confession's anti-Catholic denunciation of 'filthy synagogues' (BoC 3.18). We have retained Q. and A. 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism, added by Elector Frederick to condemn the idolatry of the Catholic mass (BoC 4.080). We have retained the II Helvetic's prohibition against women baptizing (BoC 5.191). We have retained the pervasively male language for humanity in the Confession of 1967 (BoC 9.01–56). Part of the role of our Book of Confessions is to serve as a family photo album. Even the awkward and embarrassing pictures in it are essential parts of our story. The confessions show us who we have been, in both our glorious and shameful moments. When candidates for ordained office in the PC(USA) promise to 'be instructed and led by those confessions as they lead the people of God' (W-4.04c), part of what this means is to be instructed by our mistakes, by our historical teachings that have not passed the test of time.

To give what I hope is an uncontroversial example, Presbyterians no longer regard the Pope as the Antichrist or Roman Catholic churches as 'Synagogues of Satan' (BoC 6.145). But simply to delete those affirmations from the Westminster Confession would be a kind of theological photoshopping. We may be embarrassed to belong to a confessional tradition that has only recently embraced



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an ecumenical generosity towards Catholics and let go of 500-year-old grudges. But sometimes the role of confessions of faith is to prompt our confession of sin, and keeping the ugly and awkward pictures in our family album is a way to do that. They keep us from pretending to be something that we are not. Presbyterian arguments about the status of the Westminster Confession have sometimes presented a false alternative: either the Westminster standards are relevant for today or they are outdated. I reject those alternatives. The confessions remain relevant to us *also* in the places where we come to recognize that they are in need of improvement. They encourage us, along with the Scots Confession, to ‘sob and mourn’ over our shortcomings and to ‘rise again with earnest and unfeigned repentance’, relying not on our own power, but on ‘the power of the Lord Jesus, apart from whom [we] can do nothing’ (BoC 3.13).

So part of me would like to retain the original text of the Westminster in our Book of Confessions. On the other hand, part of me appreciates the mangled text of the Confession as we currently have it, for this also serves as a reflection of the American Presbyterian story. The textual scars remind us of our struggles and divisions but also our faith’s search for understanding. To reset the Westminster Confession back to its original form would be to erase the difficult history associated with it. When I read the Westminster Confession with my students, we use a study edition that shows both the original and the amended text. That makes it easy to see the points of strain and argument. The state of the current text of the Westminster reflects what it means and has meant to American Presbyterians: it is scarred and battle-weary, but it still carries a central part of our church story.

I respect the deep history reflected in the many American Presbyterian revisions to the Westminster Confession, but I also give thanks that my branch of Presbyterianism is no longer forced to keep tinkering with a seventeenth-century English document. Of course, revising confessional documents has a long and distinguished history in Christian faith. I doubt that any of us prefer the original version of the Nicene Creed to the amended version adopted at Constantinople in 381. But there is a limit to how much a text can be revised without doing violence to it. The Declaratory Statement added to the Westminster Confession by American Presbyterians in 1903 is in my mind an example of this violence. It declares that the doctrine of God’s eternal decrees in Chapter 3 is to be ‘held in harmony with the doctrine of His love to all mankind, His gift of His Son to be the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, and His readiness to bestow His saving grace on all who seek it.’ The Declaratory Statement goes on to insist that God ‘has provided in Christ a salvation sufficient for all, adapted to all, and freely offered in the Gospel to all’. Now I think you can make a good scriptural argument for this understanding of salvation in Christ. But I don’t see how you can claim a

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harmony between this understanding and the soteriology of the Westminster. A Book of Confessions is a more honest approach. It allows you to respect the integrity of the Westminster's theology while at the same time complementing it with other Reformed voices.

Here are some other benefits the Book of Confessions has provided to American Presbyterians.

Having a Book of Confessions better reflects the multi-centred origins of Reformed Protestantism. There has been multiplicity and internal variety among Reformed Christian confessions from the beginning. Even where the Westminster has been the sole official confessional standard, Presbyterian life has always been nourished by many theological streams. A Book of Confessions is a better mirror of how our faith is actually shaped and lived out. Setting the Westminster next to other confessional documents also highlights the ways it is unrepresentative. The Westminster Confession has theological angularities, such as its strong double predestinarianism, its strict rules for observing the Sabbath, and its positing of a covenant of works alongside a covenant of grace. Those angularities risk acquiring a normative theological status when the Westminster standards are not read in company with other Reformed statements of faith. Thanks to our Book of Confessions, my church now reads the Westminster in conversation with other Reformed voices, and that makes a big difference. For example, the Westminster with its chapter on the double decree now sits adjacent to the Second Helvetic Confession, with its affirmation that 'God had some friends in the world outside the commonwealth of Israel' (BoC 5.137), and that accordingly 'we must hope well of all' (BoC 5.055).

The tone of the Westminster Confession is also unrepresentative of all the ways Presbyterian Christians have expressed their faith. We need more than one melody, more than one theological key. The grandeur and precision of the Westminster certainly has its place, but it is complemented by the simplicity of the Shorter Catechism. It is also well complemented by the liturgical usefulness of the ecumenical creeds, the heart-on-my-sleeve passion of the Scots and the Belhar Confessions, the pastoral reassurance of the Heidelberg Catechism, the practical ministerial wisdom of the Second Helvetic, the self-critical candor of the Confession of 1967, the uncompromising Christology of the Barmen Declaration, the lyrical grace of the Brief Statement of Faith. Creeds and confessions play many different roles in the life of faith, from catechizing the young to guiding sermon preparation to training seminarians to enriching worship services. It is important to have a range of styles and genres to draw on.

A Book of Confessions also recognizes that faith is a living organism. It must bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to bear on new challenges and blessings that the

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Westminster divines did not foresee. If following Christ's Spirit we feel called to confess our faith anew regarding the threat of Nazism or the sin of apartheid on one hand, or the blossoming of ecumenism and the ordination of women to all offices in the church on the other, we can reflect those faith promptings in other confessional documents. We do not have to pretend that the Westminster says all we will ever need to say as followers of Jesus Christ.

Having a Book of Confessions is better than abandoning confessionalism. Some American Presbyterians in the nineteenth century became so dissatisfied with the Westminster Confession that they abandoned it completely, vowing to follow 'no book but the Bible, no creed but Christ'. By contrast, a Book of Confessions recognizes that we are inheritors of a long struggle to understand the Scriptures and their implications for our worship and discipleship. It would be unwise and arrogant to bypass the hard-won insights and collected wisdom of the larger community of readers. It is the *interpreted* text that forms the touchstone of our identities as Christians, and the creedal and confessional traditions have been central to that interpretive tradition. So, for example, the Book of Confessions includes the Nicene Creed as a guide for our reading of the Bible's witness to Jesus Christ, because Presbyterians are part of huge chorus of witnesses that has read Scripture in this way in order to make sense of the grace they have received in Christ by the Holy Spirit. The creeds and confessions are thus not an alien superstructure imposed on the texts of Scripture, but the result of authentic communal attempts to live into the patterns and claims of the biblical texts themselves.

Yet having a Book of Confessions also means rejecting confessional Docetism. The formation and reception of all creedal and confessional traditions is a thoroughly human, historical process. It reflects political pressures and cultural limitations as well as authentic theological insight. It is a mistake to divorce the Westminster standards from the social context of their production and the long struggle for communal appropriation, to attempt to place them beyond mediation and history. We know from the minutes of the Westminster Assembly proceedings that the divines were not of one mind on many theological topics. As an example, the Westminster divine Jeremiah Whitaker noted that 'Our conceptions are very various about the decrees' (Sess. 520.—Oct. 20, 1645.—Monday morning). Thus what became Chapter 3 of the Confession on the divine decrees represented the theology of some of the divines better than that of others. We should not lift up the Westminster as an example of perfect theological consensus or timeless theological truth.

To avoid confessional Docetism, it is crucial to keep the conversation between Scripture and confessional traditions open in both directions. The confessions

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guide our reading of Scripture, while at the same time Scripture continues to enlarge and unsettle our reading of the confessions. The role of Presbyterian confessions is not to force the untidy, diverse texts of Scripture into a Procrustean bed of theological homogeneity. That is why I much prefer the new question for American Presbyterian ordinands to the old one. The old question asked, ‘Do you sincerely receive and adopt the [Westminster Confession] as containing the system of doctrine taught in the holy Scriptures?’ The new question asks, ‘Will you fulfill your ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?’ (W-4.0404d). The new question puts our allegiances to Christ, Scripture, and confessions in right relation to each other, with obedience to Christ at the centre.

Chapter 25 of the Westminster Confession declares that ‘The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error’ (BoC 6.144). The same can be said for the purest confessions of faith. They are always the work of imperfect, fallible people, and therefore subject to mixture and error. This is true of the Westminster standards and of all the other documents in the PC(USA) Book of Confessions. And yet my Presbyterian denomination has found genuine guidance in this book.

I have given you my testimony in favour of having a Book of Confessions rather than a sole confessional standard. Now it is time for your Kirk to discern whether this is the direction in which you will head. Knowing what I do of your history, I feel certain that this discernment will involve argument. As you argue, then, I leave you with this assurance from Chapter 17 of the Second Helvetic Confession:

[...] there have at all times been great contentions in the Church, and the most excellent teachers of the Church have differed among themselves about important matters without meanwhile the Church ceasing to be the Church because of these contentions. For thus it pleases God to use the dissensions that arise in the Church to the glory of his name, to illustrate the truth, and in order that those who are in the right might be manifest (BoC 5.133).

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