

Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
August 4, 2013
Holy Communion Sunday

2 Corinthians 13:11-13; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Luke 24:28-31
"In God We Trust"

In the past two weeks the sermons have looked at our denomination's contemporary confessions. So far, we have looked at The Theological Declaration of Barmen and The Confession of 1967. The subject today is A Brief Statement of Faith, the last declaration in our *Book of Confessions*.

We're a confessional church, in other words, we like to communicate the best we can our thoughts about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit and other aspects of faith pertinent to events and issues of the day. Confessions and declarations are important statements of our faith but they are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him.

The Book of Confessions forms the first part of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA). There are eleven confessions in all: two ancient creeds, six Reformation confessions, and three contemporary declarations.

I've included A Brief Statement of Faith in the insert. It is surrounded by contemporary issues. We'll look more closely at that in a minute. First, a brief history: On the other side of the confession is a grid which provides a rough outline and timeline of the various Presbyterian churches in the US. Every major denomination has a similar grid.

The Presbyterian Church is an off-shoot from the first Presbyterian Church in Scotland founded by John Knox in 1561. He developed his theology from John Calvin in Geneva. Calvin's theology has been labeled "Reformed" as distinct from "Lutheran" founded by Martin Luther who effectively began the reformation of the church in 1517. This was the break from the Roman Catholic Church that formed the Protestant Church.

Our U.S. Presbyterian forebears were primarily Scottish, Scots-Irish, Puritan and French Huguenot (which is my heritage on my mother's side). That's the beginning of the grid. The Presbyterian Church split into different strands depending on the theology at the time but it seemed to follow orthodox or liberal expressions.

An orthodox expression would believe in the inerrancy of scripture. A liberal perspective would take a more critical approach, affirming the critical dimensions found in a liberal education taught at most universities today. Our denomination today sits largely in the latter camp and our contemporary confessions affirm that position.

A Brief Statement of Faith was written after the so-called "northern" church, the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the "southern" church, the Presbyterian Church in the United States, reunited in 1983 after splitting during the Civil War. Churches are the grassroots of a community and members found themselves on opposite sides of the war.

Churches on either side split into two denominations. It took over 100 years for them to reunite. These were the largest Presbyterian denominations in the U.S. at the time. And by then, much had changed in the intellectual, social and cultural landscape of this country.

A Brief Statement of Faith reflects these changes. Members of the original drafting committee spent their first year attempting to discern what issues demanded a theological response. After identifying hundreds of items, they concluded that the primary need to be addressed was the Presbyterian Church's lack of theological identity. Years of commitment to pluralism, while achieving valuable ends, had resulted in a loss of historical and theological memory.

Accordingly, the drafting committee set out to produce a statement of faith, brief enough to be used regularly in worship, which would restate the basics of the universal Christian faith in its Protestant and Reformed expression. Without conscious intent, the committees, drafting and revising, had developed a statement that extended the Reformed tradition into new areas not previously articulated in *The Book of Confessions*.

It provided a narrative of Jesus Christ's life and ministry, generally omitted from previous creeds. It unequivocally announced that God "makes everyone equally in God's image." For the first time, women were specifically declared equal to men and called all to ministries of the church. And, as no previous confessional document had done, it derived feminine as well as masculine images from Scripture to illustrate the love and faithfulness of God. Other nuances showed evidence of sensitivity to the concerns of women and racial ethnic persons.

We shall now look at the statement along with the insert. This format is given to confirmation students. It's a fun way of covering some of the faith bases. With the pencil in the pew draw a line from the issue to the place in the statement where it is addressed. We'll have a few minutes to do this before we share our findings.

[Congregational sharing]

The preface to A Brief Statement of Faith states that, "No confession of faith looks merely to the past; every confession seeks to cast the light of a priceless heritage on the needs of the present moment and so to shape the future. Reformed confessions, in particular, when necessary, even reform the tradition itself in the light of the Word of God.

From the first, the Reformed churches have insisted that the renewal of the church must become visible in the transformation of human lives and societies. Hence "A Brief Statement of Faith" lifts up concerns that call most urgently for the church's attention in our time. The church is not a refuge from the world; (we) are chosen for the blessing of the nations. A sound confession, therefore, proves itself as it nurtures commitment to the church's mission, and as the confessing church itself becomes the body by which Christ continues the blessing of his earthly ministry."

The confession is Trinitarian in outline. I love the trinity. It gives a fuller expression of God and God's engagement with us and our activity in the world. Each statement on the Godhead begins with trust. They are different expressions of God. That's where I came up with our best meaning of the dollar bill expression, "In God we trust." Amen.