

Our Faith

**ECUMENICAL CREEDS, REFORMED CONFESSIONS,
AND OTHER RESOURCES**



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Reformed Confessions,
and Other Resources*

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*Ecumenical Creeds,
Reformed Confessions,
and Other Resources*

Including
the Doctrinal Standards
of the
Christian Reformed Church in North America
and the
Reformed Church in America



Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This book gathers in one volume all the creeds and confessions of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC).

The creeds of both the CRC and RCA (along with many other Christian churches worldwide) are the time-tested and honored Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, and Athanasian Creed.

The editions of the three historic Reformation confessions in this book—the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort—are new translations completed jointly by the RCA and the CRC (with help from the Presbyterian Church [USA] on the Heidelberg Catechism). Within these confessions, the RCA and CRC have added explanatory footnotes or amended the text in a few places. We thank the following for their important and faithful work on the joint translation committee:

- Lyle Bierma (CRC, Calvin Theological Seminary)
- J. Todd Billings (RCA, Western Theological Seminary)
- Eugene Heideman (RCA, Western Theological Seminary, emeritus)
- Charles White (RCA staff)
- Leonard J. Vander Zee (CRC staff)
- Dawn Devries (Union Presbyterian Seminary)
- David Stubbs (Western Theological Seminary)

Also included in this book is the more recent Belhar Confession (1986), adopted as a full confession by the RCA in 2010 and as an Ecumenical Faith Declaration by the CRC in 2012.

In addition, we have included two contemporary statements of faith that stand alongside the confessions but do not have confessional status. These are *Our Song of Hope* (RCA, 1978) and *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony* (CRC, 2008).

It is our prayer that this collection will deepen the faith of our churches, further unite us in our common confessions, and serve as a testimony to the historic Reformed faith as a gift to the whole church.

—Leonard J. Vander Zee, Theological Editor,
Faith Alive Christian Resources

Introduction

For Reformed Christians, the Bible alone is the final authority for faith and practice. There is no other book that holds equal status to the Bible, for as the Belgic Confession so elegantly states, although we come to know God through the “beautiful book” of creation, “God makes himself known to us more clearly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for God’s glory and for our salvation.” The triune God speaks and acts uniquely through Scripture, using this instrument of revelation to conform his people to the image of Christ.

But how should we as Christians interpret the Bible? This is necessarily a theological question, for we cannot (and should not) pretend to approach Scripture without a faith that seeks understanding. Precisely because of the uniqueness and centrality of Scripture we cannot leave creeds and confessions behind. We are called to confess the Christian faith—a faith that is not simply the expression of our individual desires and needs but that believes the triune God is active in the church and the world, and speaks to us through Scripture. The ecumenical creeds and Reformed confessions, most arising from the crucible of theological struggle and at times fierce persecution, continue to guide our faith by returning us again and again to the heart of the revelation of the triune God in his Word.

Indeed, precisely because we value Scripture, we should turn with expectancy to the creeds and confessions of the church. We are all people of our own age. But the Holy Spirit who inspires Scripture and illumines its reading is not just the Spirit of our day. Together we share in the ongoing presence and work of the Spirit who was given to the church to guide it into the truth throughout its long history. Thus, if we are to read Scripture in a way that is open to the Spirit’s life-giving and countercultural illumination in our age, we cannot be content with reading Scripture only through the lens of our contemporary situation. We need to read Scripture with those who have come before—and the creeds and confessions give us access to the wisdom of our forebears.

The Reformed tradition, as represented by its confessions, sees itself as catholic—not in the sense of being “Roman Catholic” but in its participation in the “one holy catholic and apostolic church” as confessed in the Nicene Creed. As such, the Reformed tradition does not seek to reinvent the wheel when it comes to core catholic doctrines derived from Scripture, such as the Holy Trinity. Indeed, at the conclusion of two articles on the Trinity, the Belgic Confession notes its common confession with the universal church, saying that “we willingly accept the three ecumenical creeds—the Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian—as well as what the ancient fathers decided in agreement with them” (Art. 9). Being Reformed does not mean that we cling as individuals to the Bible in a way that ignores the long tradition of Christian teaching that stretches back to the early church. Instead, as Reformed churches we join together with the universal church in confessing the biblical teaching of these creeds.

In addition, the Reformed confessions provide us with vital scriptural interpretation that gives us a broad view of the gospel, revealing the contours of historic Christian teaching from a Reformed perspective. And for people who value Scripture highly, the confessions are a key witness to the teaching of Scripture because we cannot (and should not) approach Scripture as though we were blank slates. Since we always bring presuppositions to the Bible, the confessions serve to shape our understanding in faithful ways and provide a needed theological lens for interpreting Scripture's message. Forged in the deep study and intense struggle of the saints who have gone before us, the creeds and Reformed confessions strengthen our witness to the biblical gospel today.

The jointly translated Reformation confessions in this book represent a celebration of shared heritage and the promise of contemporary ecumenical fellowship. Building on the insights of ongoing historical inquiry and rendered in contemporary English, the shared edition of these confessions anchors us in the deep insights and scriptural interpretations of our past, even as we continue the conversation with others who share in the rich and multifaceted Reformed tradition today.

—J. Todd Billings, Associate Professor of Reformed Theology,
Western Theological Seminary



Ecumenical Creeds

Apostles' Creed

This creed is called the Apostles' Creed not because it was produced by the apostles themselves but because it contains a brief summary of their teachings. It sets forth their doctrine, as the German scholar Philip Schaff put it, "in sublime simplicity, in unsurpassable brevity, in the most beautiful order, and with liturgical solemnity" (History of the Apostolic Church, p. 568.) In its present form the Apostles' Creed is dated no later than the fourth century. More than any other Christian creed, it may justly be called an ecumenical symbol of faith.

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,*
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic** church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

*in the Heidelberg Catechism within this volume, this line reads ". . . his only begotten Son, our Lord"

**that is, the true Christian church of all times and all places

Our Faith brings together, for the first time, all the confessional standards and other doctrinal statements of the Christian Reformed Church in North America and the Reformed Church in America. In addition to the 2011 ecumenical translations of the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort, this volume includes

- The Ecumenical Creeds (Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian)
- The Belhar Confession
- *Our Song of Hope* (RCA)
- *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony* (CRC)