

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Reformation Sunday**  
**October 30, 2022**

**The Church Arises**

Today is Reformation Sunday, a day when we celebrate how the church has grown and changed as it seeks to be Christ's body on earth. This church we know and love today, Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, did not come about by accident. We stand on the shoulders of countless generations who have sought to love and serve God, interpret the scriptures, and work out their faith in their particular day and time. This service celebrates their legacy by taking a journey through the PC(USA) Book of Confessions. Some of you may be familiar with the confessions, and some of you may know nothing about them. The confessions are, simply, statements of faith; the efforts of various people at various times to make some kind of coherent summary of what Christianity calls us to say and do.

These confessions are part of our constitution as Presbyterians, meaning they guide and shape our life together. Pastors and elders vow to be guided by them. They are not scripture, and we do not believe or follow every word they say; but they do witness to the journey our ancestors have taken in gifting us with the church we know today.

As we prepare to journey from the earliest Christian church to the present day, I invite you into prayer: Lord, give us open ears to hear your voice in the voices of our ancestors; give us open minds to understand what they experienced and believed; give us open hearts to accept what you might be saying to us today. As we leaf through the history of your church, guide us into writing new chapters for the future! In your holy name we pray. Amen

## **The Nicene Creed**

It was 381 AD. The emperor Constantine had declared Christianity the unified religion of the Roman Empire—but found that Christianity was anything but unified. He had already convened one council to try to bring some order to this unruly young religion, but Christians with different perspectives on the divinity of Jesus continued to fight it out—sometimes with their pens, and sometimes with their fists! And so, in 381, another council came together, and adopted the Nicene Creed, which shares much language with the Apostles' Creed, and is used by creedal Christians in diverse traditions across the world. Let us responsively proclaim what our ancestors have so long believed, beginning in unison,

**We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty,**

maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

**We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,**

eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

**We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,**

who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

**We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.**

**Amen.**

### **Call to Confession**

For nearly 1500 years, that Catholic church grew and spread across the globe, and while it underwent change and transformation, it managed to mostly hang together until an earthquake hit it, an earthquake called the Protestant Reformation. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed 95 complaints to a church door in Wittenberg, sparking debate and controversy that would eventually lead to new and even more diverse ways of being the church. It was not an easy time, and the reformers were not always the heroes we would have them be. So, lest we get too puffed up celebrating our own family line, let's stop now and confess our sins together, asking God for mercy and pardon, using the words printed in your bulletin.

### **The Church is Reformed**

The years leading up to 1517 were essential to Martin Luther's growing complaint with the church. In 1515–1517, as a brand-new professor at the University of Wittenberg, Luther lectured on the book of Romans and Galatians. While Luther studied and taught the scriptures, he wrestled mightily with the established dogma of the church concerning grace and faith. In what is sometimes called his "Damascus Road" or

“Tower Experience,” Luther had his Reformation breakthrough and discovery.

After years of much prayer, meditation, and struggle, Luther discovered that he now no longer needed to look to his own works, behavior, or obedience to determine his standing before God. He discovered that the believer had the full righteousness of Christ, who fulfilled the Law, already *now*—not maybe or later—*by faith*. For peace of conscience, rather than looking to his own active goodness and holiness spurred on by “infused grace,” he could rest confident in the declaration of God that the sinner is righteous because they are covered in the righteousness of Christ.

Luther’s breakthrough was that God justifies a person not by giving them the ability to become righteous but by crediting the holiness, obedience, and goodness of Christ to the person as righteousness. “Justification is not a change in [a person] but the gracious declaration of God by which God pronounces righteous the sinner who in [themselves] is not righteous.”

**Scripture: Romans 1:16–17; 3:21–24; 5:1–5; 12:1–2**

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is God’s saving power for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith, as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed and is attested by the Law and the Prophets, the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

### **The Scots Confession**

The Scots Confession was written in Scotland, of course, in 1560, in the course of just four days. In a time of political turbulence, it declares God's everlasting power over the Kirk—the Scottish word for church—and indeed the whole world. This is what our ancestors proclaimed:

As we believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, so we firmly believe that from the beginning there has been, now is, and to the end of the world shall be, one Kirk (church), that is to say, one company and multitude of people chosen by God, who rightly worship and embrace him by true faith in Christ Jesus, who is the only Head of the Kirk, even as it is the body and spouse of Christ Jesus. This Kirk is catholic, that is, universal, because it contains the chosen of all ages, of all realms, nations, and tongues, be they of the Jews or be they of the Gentiles, who have communion and society with God the Father, and with his Son, Christ Jesus, through the sanctification of his Holy

Spirit. It is therefore called the communion, not of profane persons, but of saints, who, as citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, have the fruit of inestimable benefits, one God, one Lord Jesus, one faith, and one baptism.

## **The Heidelberg Catechism**

Over on the mainland, Lutherans and Reformed Christians—what we know now as Presbyterians—were fighting over communion. And so, theologians from each camp sat down together in Germany to create a statement they could all agree with, to find words of unity and peace, and to remember that despite faithful disagreements, they ultimately all belonged to Christ. They wrote their confession as a series of questions, formally called a catechism. These questions invite us to proclaim for ourselves the trust we have in Christ. So let us respond to their first question together, in the words printed in your bulletin.

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. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of evil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.**

## The Westminster Standards

A generation after the Reformation, a group of English theologians gathered to create a new confession. Over the course of more than a thousand meetings (how Presbyterian!), they created the Westminster Confession. In addition, this period produced two catechisms, one for preachers by a professor of divinity, the other for children by a professor of mathematics. The following questions were for children to memorize! Using the words printed in your bulletin, let us ask ourselves the same questions our ancestors asked.

Q. 1. What is the chief and highest end of humanity?

**A. Humanity's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.**

Q. 33. What is justification?

**A. Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.**

Q. 34. What is adoption?

**A. Adoption is an act of God's free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all privileges, of the children of God.**

Q. 35. What is sanctification?

**A. Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole person after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin and live unto righteousness.**

Q. 36. What are the benefits which in this life do accompany or flow from justification, adoption, and sanctification?

**A. [A]ssurance of God's love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, increase of grace, and perseverance therein to the end.**

### **And Always Being Reformed...**

Historians talk about the Reformation as a closed era in the past, but we who tell God's story know that God is always forming and re-forming the church. It is not just an event in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the purview of white European males. The work of reform continues now, especially as it concerns ensuring all people are welcomed as full and equal participants in the Body of Christ. We are jumping forward now, to the modern confessions, that wrestle with a changing world.

### **Barmen Confession**

It was 1934, and the Nazi Party was on the rise in Germany, initiating a reign of cruelty, hate, and terror. Most German Christians found no problem with Hitler's actions, declaring that their faith and their patriotism went hand in hand, and that Hitler's rule was God's will. A few Christians, however, resisted. Representatives from the Reformed, Lutheran, and United churches gathered to create a confession of faith to send to their fellow German Christians, urging them to display their freedom in Christ by standing firm against Hitler's designs for Germany. While our situation is not theirs, we confess the eternal truth that the church was not meant to be co-opted by political forces, but clings only to Christ. Listen to the words of our ancestors:

The Christian Church is the congregation of the people in which Jesus Christ acts presently as the Lord in Word and Sacrament through the Holy Spirit. As the Church of pardoned sinners, it has to testify in the midst of a sinful world, with its faith as with its obedience, with its

message as with its order, that it is solely his property, and that it lives and wants to live solely from his comfort and from his direction in the expectation of his appearance. We reject the false doctrine, as though the church were permitted to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions.

### **Confession of 1967**

The 1960s turned America upside down (some of you remember those days!). In the midst of so many different cultural tensions and conflicts, the northern Presbyterian Church adopted a new confession based around the idea that in Christ, the whole world is reconciled to God. Listen to the words of our ancestors:

God's redeeming work in Jesus Christ embraces the whole of humanity's life: social and cultural, economic and political, scientific and technological, individual and corporate. It includes humanity's natural environment as exploited and despoiled by sin. It is the will of God that his purpose for human life shall be fulfilled under the rule of Christ and all evil be banished from his creation. Biblical visions and images of the rule of Christ, such as a heavenly city, a father's house, a new heaven and earth, a marriage feast, and an unending day culminate in the image of the kingdom. The kingdom represents the triumph of God over all that resists his will and disrupts his creation. Already God's reign is present as a ferment in the world, stirring hope in people and preparing the world to receive its ultimate judgment and redemption.

With an urgency born of this hope, the church applies itself to present tasks and strives for a better world. It does not identify limited progress with the kingdom of God on earth, nor does it despair in the

face of disappointment and defeat. In steadfast hope, the church looks beyond all partial achievement to the final triumph of God.

## **Belhar Confession**

It was 1986, and apartheid, the separation and treatment of people based on race, raged in South Africa. Some white Christians used scripture to justify this system, and so the Dutch Reformed Church wrote the Belhar Confession in protest, insisting that God's vision for humanity was one of liberation, equality, unity, and communion. Let us listen to the words of our ancestors, translated to English from the original Afrikaans.

We believe that God has revealed himself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people; ...

**that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged;**

that God calls the Church to follow him in this; for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; ...

**that the Church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged;**

that in following Christ the Church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

**Therefore, we reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.**

## **Benediction**

It was 1983, and the Northern and Southern Presbyterian churches in America had just reunited. Presbyterians celebrated this new church and its future with a new confession, written for use in worship. A Brief Statement of Faith reminds us that the church is not meant to be a hiding place from the world, but a blessing to the world. And so, as we go forth to carry on the legacy of our ancestors, and to write a new chapter in God's story, let us use the words of our ancestors as today's charge. They are printed in your bulletin.

**In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace. In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"**

As you go forth from this place, go with the love of God who created you, the peace of Christ who saved you, and the Holy Spirit who reforms, renews, and refreshes you, today, tomorrow, and evermore. Amen.