

A Declaration of Faith for the Presbytery of Shenango
(re. 9/18/13)

(1.0) Our Cultural Context

(1.1) We are disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, and members of the body of Christ, the Church. Therefore we trust in the sovereign grace of God, the lordship of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to God's mission in the world. We will not be defined by the current fear and anger of our day. Rather we understand the challenges before us as emerging opportunities to share in the "Missio Dei," God's mission.

Rationale: The declaration begins with a clear, Reformed statement of who we are together and the God we trust. It moves against the cultural norm of "it's all about me." It also introduces the concept of opportunities for mission, and not paralyzing grief over losses.

(1.2) We now live in a time of rapid change. And while the issues of sexuality and ordination may be identified, by some, as the most significant conflict in the Presbyterian Church (USA), we understand the conflict over these issues as a consequence of deeper cultural changes:

Collapse of Christendom: The mutual relationship of church and state has dissolved into a growing cultural secularism, leaving churches to define their beliefs and mission in a growing market place of truth claims and religious consumerism;

Deconstruction of Denominations: Denominational identity matters less and less due to eroding trust, so churches seek their own identities and question the value of denominational loyalties;

Polarization: Complex and challenging issues are reduced to simple dichotomies, resulting in prideful assumptions, politically driven actions, and hurtful schisms within the life of the church;

Demographic Shifts: Many churches are located within communities that are increasing in average age and decreasing in population, resulting in diminishing memberships and resources.

Rationale: This section immediately begins by identifying the issue of ordination and sexuality, but places it within the context of the cultural changes all around us.

(1.3) As a result of these changes many congregations find themselves increasingly paralyzed by anxiety, anger and conflict. As the Presbyterian Church (USA) deconstructs amidst a growing institutional and theological crisis, some of the churches in the Presbytery of Shenango have sought dismissal to other Reformed denominations. Many others have a growing discomfort with denomination and culture, and most are looking to the Presbytery for fresh and clear leadership.

Rationale: This section seeks to summarize the situation in many of our churches/pastors as a result of the changes listed above. While sexuality is the presenting problem for many churches, the challenges are really broader and deeper. This section also seeks to present the "reason" for this statement.

(1.4) Therefore, trusting in the triune God, we make this statement of faith amidst the challenges and pressures of ministry today. In consideration of this statement we found the “Theological Declaration of Barmen” (1934) within The Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (USA) helpful in form and scope. Like Barmen we declare the authority of scripture in shaping this statement. And as in Barmen, this is not a comprehensive statement of faith. Rather this is a brief statement which addresses the particular issues of our day. And finally, like Barmen this is not only a statement of what we believe. Rather this is a statement of what we also resolve to do together in ministry and mission as the church of Christ in the Presbytery of Shenango.

Rationale: This section restates our trust in God amidst our context. It briefly explains our use of Barmen. It also presents our challenge to not simply define belief, but to move to new actions. This declaration is shared in the hope that the Presbytery of Shenango can identify an essential/core theology, leave room for disagreements on the boundaries, and find unity in the gift of God’s grace in Christ in the center.

(2.0) The Lordship of Jesus Christ

(2.1) “And he asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Christ.’” (Mark 8:29; Matthew 16:15-16; Luke 9:20)

Rationale: The confessional section of the declaration begins with the central and simplest confession of Christian faith, found in all three synoptic gospels.

“Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9-11)

Rationale: This is a simple confession of Christ’s lordship, based in an early church hymn.

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers of powers, all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross.” (Colossians 1:15-20)

Rationale: This text is a late 1st C. church reflection on Christology, and an expanding understanding of lordship.

(2.2) Together we confess; “Jesus Christ is Lord.” In making this central confession together:

We affirm the earliest and defining confession of Christian faith, and we reject all other claims of lordship from inside or outside the Church as idolatry;

We affirm that our unity is found in the lordship of Christ, and we reject all other personal and political claims of sovereignty as temporal and secondary;

We affirm our ultimate trust in the purposes, power and grace of God for the Church and all creation through the risen and reigning Jesus Christ, and we reject all anxiety caused by the current cultural and ecclesiastical changes;

We affirm the freedom of the Christ’s lordship in the work of God’s salvation in the Church and creation, and we reject all limitations to the freedom of Christ’s lordship not in keeping with the revelation of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ, scripture, and witness of the Church.

Rationale: In beginning our confession with the lordship of Christ we are standing with the witness of the early church in the centrality of Christ’s lordship in faith and life. This means that confessing Christ as Lord is the supreme witness to Christian faith, as opposed to the litmus test issues of the day, right or left. This also means that all other claims of sovereignty, political or personal, are secondary to Christ’s lordship. Amidst the fear and anxiety over the dramatic changes in our culture and church, to confess Jesus is Lord is to ultimately trust the sovereign purposes of God at work in the world. We can certainly grieve the loss of what we have known. But to confess Christ as Lord is to have a deeper ground of hope. And finally to confess Christ as Lord is to trust the freedom of Christ’s lordship at work in the world, perhaps at times beyond our complete understanding, but within the revelation of the gospel in incarnation, scripture and church. To limit that freedom beyond this revelation is to make ourselves lord. Therefore we have a humble confidence in Christ’s lordship, knowing that Christ often goes before us inviting us to follow beyond the comforts of our limited views (i.e. The gospel including gentiles, eunuchs, slaves, women, other cultures and races).

(2.3) We act on our confession that “Jesus Christ is Lord” by:

- Joining together in regular study and accountability fellowships which encourage spiritual and theological growth;
- Extending the vision of God’s work of redemption and ministry beyond our congregations to the mission of God in our communities.

Rationale: The supreme confession of Christ’s Lordship as central, unifying, trustworthy and humbling in our days (and in any day) requires fellowships of study, prayer and accountability, and missional work beyond our walls and comfort zones to where we discover Jesus going before us.

(3.0) The Theology of Church

(3.1) “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” (I Corinthians 1:2)

“I, therefore, the prisoner on the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4:1-6)

Rationale: There is no shortage of scripture texts on the nature and mission of the church. These scriptural texts were chosen because they reflect the core unity of the church in the grace and work of God in Jesus Christ, and the diversity of particular churches from each other. The church is also defined by its mission/sharing in God’s redemptive plans for creation, but that discussion is left for the mission section of the statement. Rather it seemed important here to focus on the God given nature of the church; who we are together as a gift of God’s grace.

(3.2) Together we confess; “There is one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.” In making this confession together:

We affirm there is one church, created and sustained by the grace and providence of God, and we reject all claims that the church is created and sustained by even the best of human effort;

We affirm the church is a holy community, set apart by the confession “Jesus is Lord,” and by the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in the preaching of Word of God, the sharing of the sacraments of baptism and communion, and the exercise of discipline to shape followers of Jesus Christ, and we reject all claims that would define the church according to particular political, cultural or theological ideologies;

We affirm the church is catholic, having both a local shape and mission according to its particular history, culture and witness to the gospel, and a part of a global fellowship as God’s church in the world, and we reject all exclusive claims of a particular church or denomination as the true church;

We affirm the church is apostolic, sharing with churches throughout the ages the call of God to be sent out into the world to bear witness to the good news of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, and we reject all claims of a self-serving mission, that the church exists primarily for itself and for the benefit of its members.

Rationale: This sections draws on the definition of church from the Nicene Creed, and elaborates on “one holy catholic and apostolic Church,” as it comes from the deep theological well of our faith tradition, and is a good ecclesiastic summary of the nature of the church.

(3.3) We act on our confession about the church by:

- Respectfully listening to different beliefs and opinions on various topics, while trusting and practicing the given unity of God’s church;
- Confessing we are forgiven sinners, called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be disciples of Jesus Christ;

- Discerning God’s calling to be a particular expression of the kingdom of God in our neighborhoods, and to be in fellowship with God’s church in the world;
- Seeking God’s missional vision, life and practice as a community of followers of Jesus Christ beyond the walls of the church.

Rationale: The practices that come from the above confessions seek to live into the church’s unity in core beliefs, while allowing for diversity in secondary beliefs, and life together shaped by love, humble discipleship/piety, and sharing in God’s mission.

(4.0) The Theology of Scripture

(4.1) “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all they do they prosper.” (Psalm 1:1-3)

“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” (II Timothy 3:16-17)

Rationale: The texts reflect John Calvin’s comments that scripture is “divine baby talk,” God’s condescension to the limits of human knowledge, and the revelation of “the Word of God” written.

(4.2) Together we confess that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the revelation of the word of God written, and means of God’s grace for faith and life. In making this confession together:

We affirm the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the writing, reading, preaching and teaching of the Bible, and we reject any claims that the Bible is only the work of human authors, editors, politics and histories;

We affirm the authority of the Bible in the life and faith of the Church and Christians, and we reject any superior claims of authority by persons, books, councils or governments;

We affirm the interpretation of the Bible within the context of the biblical canon, the community of the church, and the final direction of increasing love of God and neighbor, and we reject all interpretations which isolate a text of scripture from canon, church community, and love.

Rationale: The above affirmations reflect the basic Calvinist/Neo-orthodox theology of scripture; inspiration, authority and interpretation.

(4.3) We act on our confession about scripture by:

- Reading and reflecting on scripture in our own spiritual lives;
- Preaching and teaching scripture in the regular life of the church;

- Interpreting and studying scripture within the context of the canon, the wider church community, the neighborhoods of our mission, and the practice of love.

Rationale: The practice of the inspiration, authority and interpretation of scripture puts it in the middle of personal spiritual life (often missing in the devotional life of clergy as well as laity, and then a text is pulled out to defend a particular position), church life (preaching and teaching scripture requires the art of exegesis which is part of our Reformed tradition), and the larger contexts of canon, church community, neighborhoods, and the practice of love.

(5.0) The Theology of Mission

(5.1) “He had told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

“He said to them, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’” (Luke 10:2)

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27)

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

Rationale: Mission is the primary call of what it is to be followers of Jesus Christ and the church; bearing witness in word and deed to the good news of God’s present/coming kingdom, revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The good news of salvation is word and deed, traditional evangelism and social justice, belief and practice. It is “indicative” (“For God so loved the world”) and “imperative” (“Love the Lord your God...Love your neighbor as yourself”). It is more that “a ticket to heaven,” but rather bears witness to the present and coming kingdom of God in the particular contexts of life and church.

(5.2) Together we confess the church exists to bear witness in word and deed to the good news of the present and coming kingdom of God. In making this confession together:

We affirm this good news includes both the invitation to faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and to new life in the kingdom of God in the world, and we reject all expressions of the good news which reduce the witness to only one side without the other;

We affirm this good news is the witness of the whole church and each Christian, and we reject all understandings and practices of mission that would limit mission to the work of particular committees, or groups of people, or missionaries;

We affirm that all mission is first the activity of God in the world, and second the discovery and participation of Christians and churches in that mission, and we reject all understandings and practices of mission which make it primarily the plan and effort of people;

We affirm that the field of mission is everywhere, both inside and outside the doors of the church, and we reject any limits to God's mission in the world.

Rationale: This section reflects the missional theology that has taken root in Shenango; holistic gospel of belief and practice, the witness/practice of all Christians, God is already active in the world/our communities in mission and our job is to pay attention to that activity and share in it, and the new mission field is both inside and outside the doors of the church.

(5.3) We act on our confession about mission by:

- Sharing the good news of Christianity in words about our faith in Christ, and in actions of justice and love;
- Inviting all Christians to discover their own call and gifts of God for mission;
- Getting out into our neighborhoods and world to discover where God is already active in mission, and then sharing in that mission;
- Living together as Christ's church with love for God and neighbor as the provisional demonstration of God's kingdom in the world.

Rationale: This section is a summary of missional practices; witness by word and action, challenge all Christians to discover a mission lifestyle, pay attention to God's activity/energy in congregation and community and find ways to share in it, get out of the church into the community, and bear witness to the coming kingdom of God in church life together.

(6.0) The Theology of Sexuality

(6.1) "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:16-17)

"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." (2 Cor. 5:17, 19)

Rationale: All discussions of salvation, the people of God/church, and life as a Christian begins with God's grace in Jesus Christ for all people.

"All things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial. All things are lawful, but not all things build up." "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God." (1 Cor. 10:23, 31)

"For freedom Christ has set us free." "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love." "For you were called to freedom brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another." (Galatians 5:1a, 6, 13)

Rationale: The power of grace in Christ sets people free from the power of sin, but freedom is to be bound by love, responsibility and honoring God in the kingdom of God breaking into the world.

“And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.” (Acts 15:8-9)

“For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:26-28)

Rationale: The grace of God in Christ, and the power of God in the Holy Spirit cross temporary, human boundaries of who we judge to be in/out the kingdom of God.

Rationale for Section on Scripture: The extended section on scripture attempts to reflect a theology that is more than “proving” a particular position by citing a particular scripture. Rather the scripture cited above bear witness to the bigger, deeper theology of grace, piety directed by love, and the surprising activity of God in the world to move beyond our “people of God are like us” boundaries.

(6.2) Together we confess that salvation is a gift of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, and that we seek to express our sexuality as disciples under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In making this confession together:

We affirm that all people are loved by God, and we reject all human judgments that would place any person, regardless of their sexual orientation and practice, outside the grace of God;

Rationale: God’s grace in Christ is unconditional; “nothing in life or death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:39)

We affirm that all people are invited to faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and to share in the ministry and mission of Christ’s church, and we reject any and all judgments, including those regarding sexual orientation, that would require more than the confession “Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior” for active participation in the ministry and mission of the church;

Rationale: The church follows the lead of God’s grace, and welcomes all people into its life and membership who confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

We affirm that all people are to express Christian responsibility, self-discipline and love in all sexual behavior. Some interpret this as “fidelity in the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, and chastity in singleness.” Others interpret this as “joyful submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.” Therefore we reject all ethical statements which place sexual behavior outside the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Rationale: Sexual behavior for all Christians is to reflect life in the kingdom of God. This clearly means that there are ethics for sexual behavior. For some at this time these ethics reflect more the older language of “fidelity and chastity” (Book of Order, PCUSA, 2009, G.6.0106b), and for others these ethics reflect the newer language of “submission to the Lordship of Christ” (Book of Order, PCUSA, 2011-13, G.20104b).

We affirm that faithful Christians can respectfully make room, in the one church of Jesus Christ, for others to have differing positions on the issues of sexual behavior, ordination and marriage; and we reject all statements that make a particular position on sexual behavior the litmus test for true Christian faith.

Rationale: The confession that “Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior” is the center of Christian faith and life in the church. People who make this confession can interpret scripture differently and come to different theological positions on the issues of sexuality, ordination and marriage. And though people differ, the grace of God in Christ, and the confession of faith in Christ, makes different people part of the one church. This also bears witness to the inclusive grace of God, and the intention of God’s mission in the diverse world.

We affirm the importance of discussions on sexual behavior, ordination and marriage within the current crisis of the church; and we reject all statements that make sexuality the central issue of Christian faith.

Rationale: Respectful discussions on sexuality, ordination, and marriage are a timely part of ethical conversations in the church, but this issue is not a core doctrine in Christian faith or the church, such as the Trinity, incarnation, resurrection, Lordship of Christ, mission and authority of scripture.

(6.3) We act on this confession about sexuality by:

- Bearing witness to the grace of God, extending the invitation to faith, and inviting active participation in the ministry and life of the church;
- Teaching that all sexual behavior, ordination and marriage, is under the Lordship of Jesus Christ as set forth by the authority of scripture, and is to express responsibility, self-discipline and love;
- Listening to, discussing, and studying scripture and theology on sexuality with humility and faithfulness;
- Living together as the one church of Jesus Christ, respectfully making room for people with differing positions on sexuality.

Rationale: The practices that flow from the theological statements above seek to express in a particular way of life together as a church and Presbytery; unity in essentials, liberty in nonessentials, love in all things. It is a challenge to say that theology matters, and make room for differing understandings. One answer to the challenge is to identify core beliefs (unity) and secondary beliefs (diversity). That is the effort here. Other responses are theology doesn’t matter, or polity matters more, or theology is about personal piety and polity is about community, or this particular issue of theology matters more so there is schism, etc. This is a challenge for the Presbytery of Shenango to prayerfully discuss, and perhaps find ways to live into it with faithfulness, humility and grace.