Always Already Loved

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

LANDON WHITSITT

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Landon Whitsitt

For the church, and for anyone standing at the door.

A Note on the Title

The phrase “always already” has a history. It originates in the philosophical tradition, most notably in the work of Martin Heidegger, who used the German *immer schon* to describe the way human beings are always already situated in a world of meaning before they begin to reflect on it. Since Heidegger, the phrase has been adopted by various philosophers and theologians, including

Douglas Ottati, who uses it in *A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*.

I honestly do not remember where I first encountered it. My best guess is that I absorbed it over twenty years ago through the work of the philosopher Ken Wilber and began applying it to my own theological thinking. What I can say is that the specific use I make of it, that God's love for us is always already present, preceding and grounding everything we are and do, is my own theological construction, developed over two decades of pastoral ministry and shaped by the Brief Statement of Faith that is the subject of this book. I am grateful to the thinkers whose language helped me find words for what the gospel had already shown me.

Introduction

The Thing Nobody Told You

The first time I watched it happen, I almost missed it.

I was preaching on a Sunday morning, working through a passage I had probably already preached a few times before, and somewhere in the middle of a sentence I said the thing I always say - the thing that has become the theological center of my life and my ministry. I said that God's love for us is not something we earn. It is not something we achieve. It is not waiting for us at the end of a performance we have to complete. It was there before we were. It has always been there. We are always already loved.

I have said those words hundreds of times. But that morning, a woman in the third row put her hand over her mouth and started to cry. Not dramatic, not loud, just tears, sudden and involuntary, the way your body responds to news it has been waiting to hear for a very long time.

After worship she found me in the hallway. She said, "I'm fifty-three years old. I have been in church my entire life. No one has ever told me that."

I wish I could tell you that was an unusual response. It is not. I have been a pastor for over twenty years, and in that time I have watched this same thing happen more often than I can count. The details change. The tears do not always come. Sometimes it is silence - a stillness that falls over someone's face when an old weight shifts. Sometimes it is anger: *Why didn't anyone tell me this sooner?* Sometimes it is suspicion: *That can't be right.* Sometimes it is a slow exhale, like setting down luggage carried so long you forgot you were holding it.

But the thing underneath is always the same. People have been carrying a God they believe is angry with them. Disappointed in them. Keeping score. Waiting for them to get it right before the love kicks in. They have been told, or they have absorbed, which amounts to the same thing, that God's default posture toward them is judgment, and that love is what you get if you perform well enough to earn it. They have been living under that weight for

years. Decades. Some of them their entire lives.

And then someone says: *You're always already loved. Before you did anything right. Before you figured out your theology. Before you believed hard enough or correctly enough or sincerely enough. The love was there first.*

And something breaks open.

I see this in lifelong church members who have spent forty years in the pew and never once felt safe enough to stop performing. I see it in people who left the church years ago because the God they were handed was too small and too angry to be worth their time. I see it in people who come through our doors for the first time, refugees from traditions that taught them God's love was conditional, and who sit in our sanctuary with their arms crossed and their guard up until something in the liturgy or the sermon or the communion table gets past their defenses. I see it in people who would never set foot in a church but who hear this idea secondhand and feel something stir that they cannot explain.

The response is not always the same. But the hunger is.

Always already loved. Let me tell you what I mean by that, because this phrase is going to be with us for the rest of this book.

“Always” means there was never a time when it wasn’t true. God’s love is not a reaction to anything we did. It is not a response to the fall, as if God looked at the mess we made and decided to intervene. God’s love is the reason anything exists at all. Before creation. Before covenant. Before Bethlehem. Before you. The love was there first, and it has never not been there.

“Already” means you don’t have to wait for it. You don’t have to qualify. You don’t have to pass a test or pray a prayer or clean yourself up or figure out the right answers. The love is not at the end of a process you have to complete. It is at the beginning. It is underneath everything. It is the ground you’re standing on right now, whether you know it or not.

“Loved” means this is personal. This is not an abstract theological principle about divine benevolence. This is God, turned toward you, with the full weight of everything God is, saying: *you are mine, and I am glad you exist.* Not because you are useful. Not because you are good. Because you are.

Put it together and you get something that sounds almost too simple to be theology: God has always already loved you. But do not mistake simplicity for softness. This is not a greeting card. A God who loves you before you do anything right is also a God who loves you enough to expect something of you. Grace is not indifference. The call to repentance is real and serious. But the call comes from love, not from anger. God expects something of you not because you need to earn your way into favor but because the life you are living out of alignment with your belovedness is hurting you and hurting others, and God loves you too much to leave you there.

That is the gospel as I understand it. Not good advice. Not a set of conditions to meet. Good news - an announcement about reality that changes everything once you hear it.

Now. How do I know this? Where does this conviction come from?

It comes from a lot of places - Scripture, prayer, pastoral experience, the slow accumulation of twenty years of watching God work in people's lives. But more than

anything, it comes from a document. A confession of faith that has shaped my thinking more consistently and more deeply than any other single text outside of Scripture itself.

It is called A Brief Statement of Faith, and it was adopted by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991.

If you just flinched at the word "Presbyterian," stay with me. I am a Presbyterian pastor and I will never be coy about that. But this book is not a denominational sales pitch. The Brief Statement of Faith is a confession of the Christian faith, one tradition's attempt to say, in eighty lines, what the church believes about God, about Jesus, about the Holy Spirit, and about us. The "Presbyterian" part is the soil it grows in. It is not a fence around it.

Here is what happened. In 1983, two branches of American Presbyterianism that had been separated since the Civil War came back together. The reunion plan called for a new confession - something the reunited church could say together. The document that emerged was not intended to be comprehensive. Its preface says so explicitly: it "does not pretend to be a complete list of all

our beliefs, nor does it explain any of them in detail.” It was designed to be spoken aloud in worship. Eighty lines. Brief enough to confess together on a Sunday morning. It was approved by over ninety percent of the church’s regional bodies and adopted by a ten-to-one vote at the denomination’s General Assembly, its national gathering.

But here is the thing about this document that took me years to fully appreciate. It is not a long book about a short subject. It is a short document that contains a very long faith.

Every line is load-bearing. Every word was chosen with care. Every verb tense, and I will show you this - is intentional and doing theological work that most readers walk right past. The Brief Statement has an appendix of biblical and confessional cross-references, and when you look at it you discover that those eighty lines are rooted in hundreds of scriptural passages and draw on every confession in the church’s Book of Confessions, the first half of the Presbyterian constitution. This document is, in many ways, a summation of the entire confessional tradition - the Reformed faith distilled into language a congregation can speak together. The text you see is what is visible above

ground. The root system goes deeper than you can imagine.

Over twenty years of sitting with this text, preaching it, teaching it, praying it with my congregation, I have come to believe that the Brief Statement of Faith is one of the most beautiful and theologically precise summations of the Christian faith I have ever encountered. And I have come to see that from its very first line to its very last, it is confessing the always-already-loved nature of God. The confession reads the way it does *because* we are always already loved, and every detail in it is evidence of that reality.

That is what this book will show you.

Before we begin, a word about how to read a confession, because if you come from a tradition that does not have them, or if you have never thought much about what they are for, this matters.

A confession is the church's attempt to say, in the language of a particular time and place, what it believes. The earliest confessions are the ancient creeds - the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, which Christians across nearly every tradition still say together. But

the church has never been content to stop there. Each generation faces new questions, new pressures, new ways that the gospel gets distorted or obscured. And so the church keeps confessing. It keeps finding fresh language to say enduring truths. The Reformed tradition - the branch of Christianity that traces its roots to the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, when leaders like Martin Luther and John Calvin called the church to return to the authority of Scripture and the centrality of grace - has been especially committed to this practice, producing confessions across five centuries and holding them together in a single volume precisely because no one confession says everything that needs to be said.

There is a document at the back of the Presbyterian Church's Book of Confessions that describes what confessions do. It says they declare to the church and to the world who we are, what we believe, and what God has called us to be and to do. I love that. Confessions are not just for outsiders, not just a public relations statement. They tell *us* who we are. They remind us of our own identity when we are tempted to forget it.

When I was ordained, I was asked a question that every Presbyterian officer is asked: “Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do?” There is a crucial word in that question: *reliable*. Not infallible. Not inerrant. Not exhaustive. Reliable. The confessions have earned our confidence over a long history of faithful reflection. But they are not the last word, because no human document ever is.

The best way I know to describe a confession is as a conversation partner. A reliable friend. Not someone who is never wrong, but someone who has earned your trust over a long relationship - someone whose perspective you take seriously, whose voice you respect, whose wisdom has proven itself over time. You do not follow a conversation partner blindly. You listen, you push back, you sometimes disagree. But you keep coming back because they have shown up faithfully for a long time.

And here is something important about how you read a friend’s words: you do not parse them like a contract. When a friend says

something to you, you listen for what they are pointing at, the reality behind the words, the thing they are trying to help you see. You do not cross-examine their exact phrasing. You do not hold them to the letter of every sentence as if it were a legal brief. You trust that they are trying to show you something true, and you lean in to see it.

That is how confessions need to be read. They are art, not legislation. I mean that quite seriously, and I have written about it at length elsewhere (in my book *Theology Is Art*, for those who want the full argument). But the core of it is this: theology, all theology, including confessional theology, is a creative act. It is the church's attempt to point at a reality that exceeds our capacity to describe it. Like any work of art, a confession uses the tools available to it - language, structure, imagery, rhythm - to open a window onto something larger than itself. The moment you treat a confession as a set of legal propositions - rules to be enforced, boundaries to be policed, tests to be passed - you have stopped looking through the window and started staring at the glass. You have mistaken the frame for the view. And you have killed the very thing that makes the confession life-giving.

This matters for how you read the Brief Statement of Faith. When the confession says something, it is pointing. It is inviting you into a reality. Your job as a reader is not to nail down the precise legal meaning of each phrase but to follow where the language leads, to see what the confession sees and to let it reshape how you see God, yourself, and the world. Confessions are not fences around the faith. They are windows into it.

The Brief Statement of Faith is a piece of art. And what it reveals, when you slow down long enough to really look, is the face of a God who has always already loved you.

A word about how this book works. Each chapter sits with a few lines of the confession, following its own movement from beginning to end. The confession has a shape, it begins with belonging, moves through Christ and God and the Spirit, and ends with a prayer, and the chapters follow that shape. A discussion guide at the back is there if you want to use this book in a group.

Along the way, I will be honest with you. When I am speculating about something the drafters may not have intended, I will tell

you. When I need to clear away a misunderstanding that has attached itself to a theological word, I will do that work carefully. And when the text surprises me, which it still does, after twenty years, I will share that too.

If you are Presbyterian, I hope this book helps you hear your own confession with fresh ears. If you come from another branch of the Christian family, I think you will find more here that belongs to you than you expect. If you are not sure you are a Christian at all, I think you will find a faith that is more honest, more demanding, and more generous than what you may have been told Christianity is.

The Brief Statement of Faith begins with six words that change everything.

In life and in death we belong to God.

No conditions. No prerequisites. No transaction. Just belonging. Just love. Always already.

Let me show you what I mean.

A Brief Statement of Faith

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) • 1991

Book of Confessions 11.1–11.6

11.1

> *In life and in death we belong to God. Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve.*

11.2

> *We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God. Jesus proclaimed the reign of God: preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, teaching by word and deed and blessing the children, healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe*

the gospel. Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal.

11.3

We trust in God, whom Jesus called Abba, Father. In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God's image, male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community. But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator. Ignoring God's commandments, we violate the image of God in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care. We deserve God's condemnation. Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation. In everlasting love, the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people to bless all families of the earth. Hearing their cry, God

delivered the children of Israel from the house of bondage. Loving us still, God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant. Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still.

11.4

We trust in God the Holy Spirit, everywhere the giver and renewer of life. The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church. The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture, engages us through the Word proclaimed, claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church. 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!"

11.5

With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

11.6

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Part One: We Belong

Chapter 1: In Life and in Death

In the introduction, I told you that the Brief Statement of Faith taught me what always already loved means. I told you it took twenty years. That is true, but it is also true that the teaching begins immediately, in the very first line. If you hear nothing else in this entire document, hear this.

In life and in death we belong to God.

The confession opens with a sentence so simple it is easy to walk right past.

No preamble. No throat-clearing. No "whereas" or "inasmuch as." The confession does not ease you in. It drops you into the deepest claim the Christian faith makes, and it does it in nine words.

Read it again, slower this time. *In life and in death we belong to God.* This is not an argument. It is not a proposition waiting for your agreement. It is a declaration, a statement about reality that is true whether

you accept it or not, the way gravity is true whether you believe in it or not. The confession does not say “we have chosen to belong to God” or “we belong to God if we meet the following conditions.” It says *we belong to God.* Full stop. That is the foundation. Everything else in this document, every line about Christ, every word about the Spirit, every claim about sin and grace and courage and hope - rests on this sentence.

So let’s take it apart and see what is inside it.

“In life and in death.” Notice what the confession is doing with those five words. It is not saying that belonging applies in two specific situations, when you are alive and when you are dead. It is using a poetic device called a *merism*, a way of naming two extremes in order to include everything between them. When Genesis says God created “the heavens and the earth,” it doesn’t mean God only made two things. It means God made everything, all of it, top to bottom, the whole range of reality. “Heavens and earth” is a way of saying *everything that exists*.

“In life and in death” works the same way. Life and death are the two most extreme

conditions you can imagine. They are the poles. And the confession is saying: belonging covers the whole range. Not just the good parts of life and not just the dramatic moment of death. All of it. The Monday morning commute. The diagnosis. The promotion and the layoff. The birth of your child and the death of your parent. The seasons when God feels close and the seasons when God feels like a rumor. In all of it, in the totality of your existence, you belong to God.

Let that land for a moment. Whatever you are carrying right now, whatever season of life or death you're standing in, this sentence says you belong to God in the middle of it. Not after it resolves. Not when you figure it out. Now.

The theologian Paul Tillich pushed this even further. He spoke of "non-being", the reality that there was a time before you existed and there will be a time after you cease to exist. If the merism covers everything between and including life and death, then belonging extends even into the territory of non-being. You belonged to God before you were born. You will belong to God after you die. Your belonging is not bounded by your biography. It precedes you and it outlasts you.

That's what always already loved sounds like in confessional language.

"We belong to God." Four words, and every one of them is doing enormous work.

Start with "we." Not "I." The very first word of the confession is communal. This isn't a statement about your personal relationship with God. It is a statement about *our* belonging - together, as a people. From the opening syllable, the Brief Statement pushes back against the hyper-individualized faith that dominates so much of American Christianity. You do not belong to God by yourself. You belong to God with these people - whoever they are, whether you chose them or not, whether you like them or not. God has always called a *people*. The faith of Scripture, from Genesis forward, is primarily communal. The African theologian Desmond Tutu captured this with the concept of *ubuntu* - "I am because we are." The confession agrees. We before I. Community before individual. That is not an accident of grammar. It is a theological claim.

And "belong." This is a word that many of us instinctively resist, because it sounds like

ownership, and ownership sounds like servitude. We do not like being told we belong to anyone. We are independent. We are autonomous. We belong to ourselves.

But the confession is not describing servitude. It is describing purpose. We are God’s - created by God, for God’s purposes, held in God’s love. That is the entire reason we exist. To belong to God is not to be enslaved. It is to be placed. It is to have a home. It is to know that you aren’t a random accident in an indifferent universe but a creature made with intention, held with care, and loved before you drew your first breath. Belonging to God is not a restriction on your freedom. It is the foundation of your identity.

And here is the thing about this belonging: you can’t lose it. You can forget it. You can neglect it. You can spend your whole life running from it. But you can’t lose it, because it doesn’t depend on you. It depends on God. The theologian Karl Barth, whose influence on this confession we will encounter again and again, insisted that the idea of a human being who does not belong to God is an absurdity. It would be like talking about a fish that doesn’t belong to water. You were made for this. When someone says “I reject God’s claim on my life,” the response is not panic or

argument. The response is something like what Tommy Lee Jones says to Harrison Ford in *The Fugitive* when Ford protests his innocence: “I don’t care.” God’s claim on your life does not depend on your acknowledgment of it. You belong to God. That isn’t a threat. It is the best news you will ever hear.

“To God.” The sentence ends with God, which means the weight of the whole thing rests there. We do not belong to ourselves. We do not belong to our nation, our political party, our employer, our family, or our tribe. We do not even belong to the church, the church belongs to God, and so do we. Every other claim on our identity and allegiance is penultimate. God is ultimate. This isn’t a statement that dismisses those other relationships. It is a statement that orders them. Everything else you belong to is real, but none of it is final. God is final.

And notice what the confession does *not* say. It does not say “we belong to God because we accepted Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior.” It does not say “we belong to God because we were baptized” or “because we joined the right church” or “because we said the right prayer.” There are no conditions.

There is no mechanism. There is no transaction. The sentence is a flat, unqualified declaration. We belong to God. Period.

This is where the always-already-loved framework is stated outright, even if the confession does not use those exact words. If belonging is unconditional, if it precedes everything we do, if it cannot be lost or forfeited, then what we're dealing with is a God whose love is the foundation of reality itself. We were made to be loved. We have always been loved. We are loved right now. That's what the first line of this confession is saying, and the rest of the document is an exploration of what that means.

Now the confession moves. Having established belonging, it tells us who this God is that we belong to.

Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve.

If you have spent any time in Christian worship, you may recognize the shape of these words. They echo a benediction that the

apostle Paul used to close his second letter to the church in Corinth: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” It is one of the most familiar blessings in the Christian tradition. Pastors say it at the end of worship every Sunday. And most of the time, most of us let it wash over us without stopping to notice what it is actually doing.

Look at the order. Grace, love, communion. Christ, God, Spirit. If you grew up reciting the Apostles’ Creed, you learned the Trinity in a different order: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. That is the classical sequence - the systematic order, the order of theology textbooks and doctrinal statements. It begins with God the Creator and works its way through to the Spirit.

The Brief Statement does not do that. It leads with Christ. And it does so because Paul led with Christ, and Paul led with Christ because that’s how we actually encounter God. We do not start with an abstract concept of a Creator and reason our way to Jesus. We meet Jesus first. We encounter grace, unearned, unmerited, given, and only then do we discover that this grace flows from a God whose nature is love, and that this love is

made real in our lives through the communion of the Spirit. The order is existential, not systematic. It describes how faith actually happens, not how theology organizes it.

This is an important clue for how to read the entire confession. The Brief Statement leads with experience and arrives at doctrine, not the other way around. We do not start with "there is one triune God" as a proposition to be accepted and then work out the implications. We start with grace, love, and communion, things we have *tasted*, and discover that they point to one God. The doctrine of the Trinity is not a puzzle the church invented to make things complicated. It is the church's attempt to describe the God it actually encountered: a God whose grace meets us in Christ, whose love sustains everything, and whose Spirit binds us together.

That is the big picture of the preamble. Now let me show you three phrases within it that are doing specific, important work.

"The one triune God." This is the apex phrase, the place where the rivers converge. Grace, love, and communion are three streams flowing from one source. The one

triune God is not three Gods cooperating. It is one God whose very nature is relational, a community within Godself. That matters enormously, and we will come back to it later in the book. For now, notice this: if God's own being is communal, then the "we" that opened this confession makes even more sense. We were made in the image of a communal God. Of course faith is communal. Of course belonging is shared. The individualism that tells us faith is a private matter between me and God contradicts the very nature of the God we're talking about.

"The Holy One of Israel." This phrase does something that the reader might not immediately notice, but it is essential. It anchors the Christian confession to the Hebrew scriptures, to a specific history, to a God with a track record. This is not a generic deity. This is not "the divine" or "the sacred" or "a higher power." This is the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God who delivered Israel from Egypt, the God who spoke through the prophets. By naming God as "the Holy One of Israel," the confession is insisting on continuity. The God we meet in Christ is not a new God. It is the same God who has been at work since the beginning, the same God who will appear throughout this document in the stories of covenant,

deliverance, and faithfulness. The Christian faith doesn't replace the story of Israel. It joins it. And this phrase makes sure you know that from the start.

"Whom alone we worship and serve." Here is the line in the sand. *Alone*. No other gods, no other ultimate loyalties, no other claims that compete with God's claim. This echoes the Shema, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one", which is the foundational confession of Judaism. It echoes the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me." And it echoes, for those who know the history, the first thesis of the Barmen Declaration, written in 1934 when the German church was being asked to serve the Nazi state alongside Christ. The Barmen Declaration insisted that Jesus Christ is the one Word of God that we are to hear, trust, and obey. The Brief Statement says the same thing, more quietly but no less firmly: *whom alone we worship and serve.* Not God and country. Not God and ideology. Not God and anything else. God alone.

One more thing before we move on, because it is going to matter for the rest of this book.

Look at the verb the confession uses. It does not say "we believe in the one triune God." It says "we *trust* in the one triune God." That word, trust, is not an accident. The confession uses it deliberately, and it uses it repeatedly. "We trust in Jesus Christ." "We trust in God." "We trust in God the Holy Spirit." Three times, once for each person of the Trinity, the confession says *trust*.

Now, in English, "trust" and "believe" feel like different words with different meanings. Trust sounds relational, you trust a person. Believe sounds cognitive, you believe a fact. But here is the thing: in the Greek of the New Testament, both words come from the same root. The word is *pistis*, and it means trust, allegiance, fidelity. *Pistis* is not mental agreement. It is not accepting that certain propositions are true, the way you believe the earth is round or that two plus two equals four. *Pistis* is the kind of trust that reorients your whole life, not your opinions alone.

The problem is not with the Greek. The problem is that the English word "believe" has drifted. Over centuries, it migrated from its original sense of trust and loyalty toward something much thinner - mere intellectual assent, holding the right ideas in your head.

The Brief Statement, by choosing “trust” instead of “believe,” is not using a different concept. It is being more faithful to what pistis always meant. When the confession says “we trust,” it isn’t asking you to agree with a set of doctrines. It is describing a posture of the whole person - heart, mind, body, community - oriented toward this God in reliance and loyalty. Trust is relational. It is something you live, not something you merely think.

The Brief Statement chose this word on purpose, and it chose it for the very first declaration of the preamble. Before the confession says anything about what God has done, it tells you how we stand before this God: in trust. Not in certainty. Not in comprehension. Not in intellectual mastery. In trust. That is the posture the confession invites, and it is the posture I am going to ask you to bring to the rest of this book.

We belong to God. We trust in this God. And this God, triune, holy, anchored in the story of Israel, claiming our exclusive worship, is the God who has always already loved us. That’s what the first six lines of the confession establish. Now the confession is going to show us what this God looks like, starting

with the person in whom God's grace meets us most clearly: Jesus Christ.

But before we go there, I want to tell you about a friend of mine.

He was a pastor. He died at thirty-six years old from an aggressive form of cancer. The medical details do not matter for our purposes. What matters is that he left a wife and children. And what matters is what his wife told the rest of us, in the updates she shared during those final weeks and days: he kept saying it. Over and over. *We belong to God.*

I wasn't at his bedside. I was states away, receiving these reports from his wife and the friends who were near. But even at a distance, what I heard was profound. Here was a man facing his own death, and I know he was sad, I know he was grieving, I am certain there were moments of anger and sorrow and fear, and the thing he kept coming back to was this sentence. This first line of this confession. *We belong to God.* In life and in death. He was living inside the merism. He was standing in the space between the two poles, and he was finding that belonging held.

I knew him well enough to know what he was doing. He wasn't performing courage. He

wasn't putting on a brave face for his family. He was affirming God's sovereignty, the same sovereignty this confession names, right to the very end. And it allowed him to approach his death with a courage and a resoluteness that I don't get to witness in all but usually the most aged. He was thirty-six. He had every reason to rage against what was happening to him. Instead, he kept telling his children the truth: we belong to God. In life. In death. Always.

That's what this sentence can hold. Not just a theological idea. A human life. A human death. The full weight of a young father saying goodbye to his children and grounding them in the one thing that would not change when everything else did.

In life and in death we belong to God.

Nine words. Enough to live on. Enough to die on.

Part Two: We Trust in Jesus Christ

Chapter 2: Fully Human, Fully God

The confession turns now from belonging to the one who shows us what belonging looks like.

We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God.

There it is again - “we trust.” The same word, the same posture, the same pistis we encountered in the preamble. The confession is not asking you to solve Jesus. It is not asking you to explain him, to work out the mechanics of how divinity and humanity fit together in one person, to pass a theology exam before you can proceed. It is asking you to trust him. That’s a different kind of invitation entirely.

And notice what comes immediately after the trust: not a list of doctrines about Christ, not a

theological argument, but a description. *Fully human, fully God.* Two phrases. Four words. And the confession leaves them sitting side by side without trying to resolve the tension between them.

This is worth pausing on, because the church has spent two thousand years trying to explain how Jesus can be both fully human and fully God, and the confession doesn't appear to be interested in that project. It does not say "fully human *and yet* fully God," as if humanity and divinity were in conflict and needed a conjunction to bridge them. It does not say "fully human *because* fully God," as if one explained the other. It says *fully human, fully God*, a comma, not a conjunction. The two realities sit next to each other, separated by the smallest possible punctuation mark, and the confession moves on.

I think the drafters knew exactly what they were doing. The comma is not laziness. It is wisdom. Because "fully human, fully God" is not a problem to be solved. It is a truth to be inhabited.

The church's history with this question has not always been so restrained. The early centuries of Christianity were consumed with

debates about Christ’s nature - debates that produced the great creeds and councils that still shape Christian theology. Was Jesus really divine, or just an exceptionally holy human being? Was Jesus really human, or did God merely appear to take on flesh? Was the divine nature dominant, absorbing the human? Was the human nature subordinate, swallowed up by the divine? Every possible way of getting the balance wrong was tried, named, and rejected. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 produced a formula that has endured: Jesus Christ is one person in two natures, fully divine and fully human, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.

That formula is important. It protects something vital, the insistence that you can’t reduce Jesus to merely human or merely divine without losing something essential. But here is what I have observed in over twenty years of pastoral ministry: almost nobody in the pew is confused by the Chalcedonian formula, because almost nobody in the pew has heard of it. What people are confused by is a much simpler version of the question: How can Jesus be both God and human? And they think they are supposed to figure it out before they can really be Christian, as if faith requires a

satisfactory answer to the metaphysical puzzle.

The Brief Statement refuses to play that game. It puts the trust first and the description second. *We trust in Jesus Christ,* that is the relationship. *Fully human, fully God,* that is who we are trusting. You don't have to understand the how. You are invited to trust the who.

But if "fully human, fully God" is not a puzzle to solve, what is it? What is the confession doing by placing these four words here?

It is making a claim about God.

Think about what it means to say that God became fully human. It means God cares about human bodies. It means God cares about flesh and bone and breath and hunger and fatigue and laughter and grief. It means the material world is not beneath God, not a prison for the soul to escape, not an obstacle to spiritual life. God entered it. Fully. Without reservation. Whatever you think about the mystery of how the incarnation works, the *what* of it is staggering: God chose to be human. Not to visit humanity from a safe

distance. Not to wear humanity like a costume. To *be* human. Fully.

This is what the Christian tradition calls the incarnation, and it is one of the most radical claims any religion has ever made. The God who created everything, the God the confession just named as “the Holy One of Israel,” the God of the burning bush and the parted sea and the thundering voice on Sinai, chose to enter creation as a vulnerable, dependent, embodied human being. God became someone who could be hungry. God became someone who could bleed. God became someone who could die.

Let that sink in. This is not a God who observed humanity from a safe distance and sent instructions. This is a God who showed up. In a body. In a specific place, at a specific time, under a specific political regime. The incarnation is God with skin on.

And here is what I need you to see, because this is where the always-already-loved framework meets the incarnation: the incarnation is not God doing something new. It is God doing what God has always done, but now visibly, bodily, in a way we can’t miss.

Look back at what the confession has already told us. God has always been turned toward us. We have always belonged to God. “The Holy One of Israel” has always been involved in the life of a specific people, a specific history. The incarnation is not the moment God suddenly decided to get involved. It is the moment God’s involvement became undeniable - took on flesh, sat down at our table, became someone you could touch. The pattern was always there. In Christ, the pattern became a person.

This is why the confession’s structure matters. Remember, the Brief Statement puts Christ before the section on God the Father. The Barthian instinct is to start with what we can see and work backward to what was always true. In Christ, we see a God who descends, who enters, who draws near. And then, when we get to the section on God the Father, we discover that this has been God’s character all along, creating, sustaining, choosing a covenant people, delivering them from bondage, refusing to let go. The incarnation does not change who God is. It reveals who God has always been.

Fully human, fully God. A God who has always already loved us, now showing up in person.

There is something else the confession is doing by insisting on “fully human,” and it matters for how we read everything that follows.

If Jesus is fully human, then his humanity is not incidental to the story. It is not a disguise the divine put on in order to accomplish a mission. Jesus’s humanness, his specific, embodied, historical humanness - is constitutive of who he is. He was, as the theologian Howard Thurman taught us, a poor Jew living under Roman occupation. That is not background information. That isn’t a footnote to the real story of his divinity. It is the story. Jesus was born into a colonized people. He grew up in an occupied land. He lived under a political regime that could, and eventually did - kill him on a whim. He knew what it felt like to be powerless in the face of empire. He knew what it meant to belong to a people who had been promised liberation and were still waiting for it.

He also knew what it felt like to be hungry, to be tired, to need sleep and not get it. He wept at the death of a friend. He asked his closest companions to stay awake with him in his darkest hour, and they fell asleep. He was, in every way that matters, one of us. Not a visitor wearing a human suit. Not God slumming it for thirty-three years. A person - particular, located, limited, real.

This matters because a Jesus who is not fully human cannot be fully trusted with our humanity. If his humanity was partial, if he only appeared to suffer, if he didn't really know what it feels like to be afraid, if he was secretly operating with divine cheat codes the whole time, then the incarnation is a performance, not a reality. And the always-already-loved God is a God who pretended to enter our experience without actually doing so. Could God have reached us some other way? God is God, of course. But this is what God chose. Full descent. Full condescension, in the old theological sense of that word - not condescension as we use it now, meaning to talk down to someone, but condescension as stooping, as bending low, as a parent who kneels to meet a child at eye level. God knew we needed to see the divine in human flesh in order to trust it. The early church had a name

for the error of denying that descent: docetism, from the Greek word for “to seem.” A Jesus who only seemed to be human. The church rejected it, firmly and repeatedly, because a God who only seems to enter your suffering is not a God who can be trusted with your suffering.

The confession will not let you go there. *Fully* human. All the way. Without reservation.

And “fully God” means that when this fully human person acts, it is God acting. When Jesus heals, God heals. When Jesus eats with outcasts, God eats with outcasts. When Jesus forgives, God forgives. When Jesus touches a leper, God is touching a leper. When Jesus lets a woman wash his feet with her tears, God is being served by someone the religious establishment considers unclean. The actions of Jesus, which the confession is about to describe in vivid, specific detail, are not merely the actions of a good man inspired by God. They are the actions of God, done in and through a fully human life.

That is why the ministry list that follows this line is so important. It is not a biography. It is a theology. It tells you what God is like by showing you what Jesus does. And it does so in present tense, an extraordinary

grammatical choice that we will sit with carefully in the next chapter. For now, know this: the confession is about to describe a God who preaches, teaches, blesses, heals, eats, forgives, and calls. Not a God who once did these things and stopped. A God who is doing them now.

All of that rests on the comma between “fully human” and “fully God.” The two natures cannot be separated, because the moment you pull them apart, you lose everything. A merely human Jesus is an inspiring teacher and nothing more, and inspiring teachers do not break the power of sin and evil. A merely divine Jesus is a God who swooped in for a rescue mission but never actually shared our condition, and a God who never shared our condition cannot be trusted when he says he understands. The comma holds. Both natures, one person, fully. And from that fullness, everything else in the confession flows.

For now, sit with this: *We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God.*

The confession is not asking you to explain the incarnation. It is asking you to receive it. To let the reality of a God who became fully human reshape what you think you know

about God - about what God is willing to do, how close God is willing to come, how seriously God takes your embodied, fragile, beautiful human life.

You're always already loved by a God who thought your humanity was worth inhabiting. Not from a distance. Not in theory. In the flesh.

That is who we trust.

Chapter 3: Preaching, Healing, Eating, Forgiving

Having told us who Jesus is, fully human, fully God, the confession now tells us what Jesus does.

Jesus proclaimed the reign of God: preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, teaching by word and deed and blessing the children, healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.

Read that list slowly. Do not rush past it. This is not filler between the incarnation and the crucifixion. This is, in many ways, the heart of the confession's portrait of Christ, a detailed, specific, almost cinematic description of what God looks like when God shows up in human form. If the previous chapter told us that Jesus is fully human and fully God, this passage shows us what that means in practice. These are the actions of

God, done through a human life, and the confession wants you to see every one of them.

Before we look at what Jesus does, notice the grammar. “Jesus proclaimed the reign of God” - that is past tense. It happened. In a specific time and place, in first-century Palestine, Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed that God’s reign was at hand. That is the historical anchor. It is a fact about the past.

But then look at what follows. Preaching. Teaching. Blessing. Healing. Eating. Forgiving. Calling. Every single one of those is a present participle - a verb form that describes ongoing, continuous action. The confession does not say Jesus preached, taught, blessed, healed, ate, forgave, and called. It says he is preaching, teaching, blessing, healing, eating, forgiving, calling. Right now. Still.

This is not an accident. We have already seen the confession use present tense deliberately - “we trust,” “we belong.” But here the pattern reveals something extraordinary. The proclamation happened once, in history. The ministry that flows from that proclamation has never stopped. Jesus proclaimed the reign

of God, and that proclamation is still taking shape in the world through present-tense verbs that refuse to become past tense.

And if those verbs are still active, if Jesus is still preaching good news to the poor, still healing the sick, still eating with outcasts, then the obvious question is: where? Through whom? The confession has not yet introduced the church. That comes later, in the section on the Holy Spirit. But the grammar is already building the bridge. These present-tense verbs are waiting for a home, and that home will turn out to be the gathered people of God. The church's vocation is described here, in the ministry of Jesus, before the church even appears in the document. When the confession eventually says the Spirit "binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church," you will know what that body is for. It is for this. Preaching, teaching, blessing, healing, eating, forgiving, calling. The church exists to continue in present tense what Jesus proclaimed in past tense.

Now look at the content. The confession gives us a list of people Jesus is drawn to, and it is remarkably specific. Not "Jesus loved everyone," which is true but vague. The

confession names them: the poor. The captives. The children. The sick. The brokenhearted. The outcasts. The sinners.

That specificity matters. It would have been easy, and much shorter, for the drafters to write “Jesus ministered to all people.” They did not do that. They named particular groups, and in doing so they made a theological argument. God’s ministry in Christ is oriented toward the people the world has decided do not matter. The poor, who have no economic power. The captives, who have no freedom. The children, who have no status. The sick, who have been sidelined by their own bodies. The brokenhearted, who are carrying wounds no one can see. The outcasts, and note that word. Not “sinners.” Outcasts. People who have been cast out. The confession is not blaming them for their condition. They are not outcasts because they did something wrong. They are outcasts because *we* cast them out.

That distinction is important. The confession refuses to collapse all of these groups into the category of “sinners,” because that would allow us to assume they are in their condition because of their own moral failure. The poor are not poor because they sinned. The captives are not captive because they deserve

it. The brokenhearted are not broken because something is wrong with them. By naming each group specifically, the confession protects their dignity. It locates the problem not in the people Jesus is drawn to but in the systems and communities that marginalized them.

And then “forgiving sinners”, which comes near the end of the list, after all the specific groups have been named. Sinners. Now we’re talking about all of us. But not “sinners” the way most people hear that word, not the especially bad people, not the ones who have committed the worst offenses. The New Testament Greek word for sin is *hamartia*, and it doesn’t mean “breaking the rules.” It means missing the mark. Think of an archer whose arrow falls short or veers wide. *Hamartia* is misdirected trust, misaligned love, the human condition of living out of step with the reality of our own belovedness. We will spend more time with this concept later in the book, when the confession takes us into the territory of rebellion and hiding. For now, what matters is this: “sinners” in the deepest sense encompasses every human being. We have all missed the mark. We have all lived out of alignment.

So the confession moves from the specific to the universal: first the poor, the captive, the children, the sick, the brokenhearted, the outcasts, and then sinners, which is everyone. The particular groups come first, and then the universal claim. God names the specific people first, and then includes all of us. Particularity produces universality. You name the ones who are suffering, and then you discover that the movement toward them is a movement toward all of us.

I want to offer a speculative reading here, and I will tell you honestly that I can’t prove the drafters intended this. But I notice it, and I think it opens something worth seeing.

Read the verbs again in order: preaching, teaching, blessing, healing, eating, forgiving, calling. There is a trajectory. Preaching is public. You can preach to a crowd from a distance. Teaching is closer - it implies a relationship between teacher and student. Blessing involves presence, often touch. Healing is personal, intimate. You have to be close enough to see the wound. Eating is one of the most intimate things human beings do together. You are at the same table, sharing food, breaking bread. And forgiving is as

close as you can get to another person - it requires knowing what they have done and choosing to release them from it.

If that trajectory is there, and I think it is, even if it wasn't consciously designed, then the confession is describing a God who moves toward us with increasing closeness. God doesn't stay at the lectern. God doesn't maintain a professional distance. God moves in, step by step, from proclamation to presence to table to the raw intimacy of forgiveness. The ministry of Jesus is a ministry of approach. God keeps getting closer.

"And calling all to repent and believe the gospel." The list ends here, and it ends with the word *all*. Not just the sinners. Not just the outcasts. All. Everyone who has witnessed this ministry, everyone who has watched Jesus preach and teach and bless and heal and eat and forgive, is now called to respond. Repentance is not a punishment reserved for the worst offenders. It is the invitation extended to everyone.

And what is the invitation? To repent, to turn around, to reorient, to realign yourself with the reality you have just witnessed. And to

believe the gospel, to trust, to place your pistis in the good news that what you have just seen is true. That God really does preach good news to the poor. That God really does eat with the people we cast out. That God really does forgive. That this is not too good to be true. It is the truest thing there is.

Repentance in this framework is not groveling. It is not self-flagellation. It is not the desperate attempt to make yourself acceptable to an angry God. It is turning around and seeing what was always already there, a God oriented toward the poor, the captive, the sick, the outcast, the broken, and you. All of you. The call to repentance is itself an act of love, because God loves you enough to say: the direction you are facing is not serving you. Turn around. Look at this. Trust it.

There is one more thing to notice about this list, and it is something the confession does so quietly you might miss it entirely.

“Blessing the children.”

Not tolerating the children. Not including the children. Not making room for the children at the margins. *Blessing* them. That is an active

conferral of worth on the people the culture considers insignificant - the ones who cannot produce, cannot contribute, cannot earn their keep. Jesus does not just allow them to come to him. He blesses them. He declares them valuable. In a world that measured worth by productivity and status, Jesus looked at the smallest, most powerless members of the community and said: you are blessed.

That’s what God does. That’s what the present tense verbs tell us God is still doing. And that is the ministry the church is called to continue, not as a nostalgic reenactment of what Jesus once did, but as the living, present-tense work of a God who has never stopped preaching good news to the poor, never stopped binding up the brokenhearted, never stopped eating with the people we would rather not sit with.

The question for us is whether we will join the present tense.

Chapter 4: This Jesus

The confession has just shown us a God who preaches good news to the poor, heals the sick, eats with outcasts, and forgives sinners. A God whose ministry is oriented toward the people the world has discarded. A God who keeps getting closer.

Now it tells us what happened next.

Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal.

These eight lines cover the two most important events in the Christian faith, the death and resurrection of Jesus. The confession doesn’t rush past them, and neither should we. But it also does not treat them the way many of us have been taught to treat them, as a transaction between God and humanity, a legal settlement, a debt paid. The

confession tells this story differently, and the difference matters.

“Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition.” Start here, because the confession starts here - not with God’s plan for salvation, not with cosmic necessity, but with injustice. The first thing the Brief Statement says about the crucifixion is that it was wrong. Jesus was unjustly condemned. Whatever else the cross means theologically, it was first and foremost a miscarriage of justice.

And notice the two charges: blasphemy and sedition. These are not the same kind of accusation. Blasphemy is a religious charge, Jesus was accused of claiming an intimacy with God that the religious establishment found intolerable. Sedition is a political charge, Jesus was accused of threatening the authority of the Roman state. Two institutions, two charges, one execution. The religious leaders said he was a danger to God. The political leaders said he was a danger to the empire. Together, they killed him.

This is not incidental detail. The confession is telling you that both the religious establishment and the political establishment found Jesus threatening enough to want him

dead. The reign of God that Jesus proclaimed, the preaching and healing and eating and forgiving we just spent a chapter with, disrupted the assumptions of both systems. The religious leaders could not tolerate a man who forgave sins and ate with outcasts, because that undermined their authority as gatekeepers of holiness. The political leaders could not tolerate a man with a following who talked about a different kingdom, because that sounded like insurrection. Jesus did not fit neatly into "sacred" or "secular" because the reign of God overturns the assumptions of both.

And here is something the confession embeds quietly but that we must not miss: the religious establishment did not carry out the execution on its own. The gospel accounts present the religious leaders - the Temple authorities, the Sanhedrin - as bringing Jesus to the Roman governor Pilate for execution. Under Roman rule, the Jewish authorities' power to impose capital punishment was restricted, and the gospel of John has them say explicitly to Pilate: "We are not permitted to put anyone to death." Whether or not that restriction was absolute, the pattern the gospels describe is clear: the religious leaders provided the theological justification; Rome provided the machinery of death. They

needed each other. The religious establishment wanted Jesus dead but turned to the empire to make it happen. The empire did not care about blasphemy but was happy to eliminate a potential insurrectionist. Together - religious legitimacy and state power, working in concert - they condemned an innocent man and called it justice.

If you know the history of the twentieth century, you know that this pattern did not end in Jerusalem. The German church provided theological cover for the Nazi state. Churches in the American South provided biblical justification for slavery and segregation. Religious institutions that feel threatened by someone who disrupts their categories have, again and again, found political powers willing to do the violent work. The confession that names "blasphemy and sedition" as the charges against Jesus is a confession written by people who know what the church is capable of. The church that reads these words aloud on Sunday morning is admitting, in its own confession, that institutional religion can get it catastrophically, lethally wrong.

“Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world.”

Crucifixion was not a quiet death. It was not an execution conducted with clinical efficiency behind closed doors. It was state-sponsored torture designed to be public, prolonged, and degrading. Rome reserved it for slaves, insurrectionists, and people the empire wanted to make examples of. Victims were stripped, beaten, nailed or bound to a cross, and displayed along public roads, sometimes for days, while they slowly suffocated under their own body weight. The point was not merely to kill. The point was to humiliate and to terrorize. Crucifixion said: this is what happens when you challenge us.

So when the confession says Jesus suffered “the depths of human pain,” it is not being poetic. It is being precise. Jesus was publicly, painfully humiliated and tortured to death by the most powerful empire on earth, with the complicity of his own religious tradition. He was rejected by his own people, abandoned by most of his friends, and subjected to a form of execution specifically designed to strip a person of every shred of dignity. The

depths of human pain is not an exaggeration. It may be an understatement.

“And giving his life for the sins of the world.” Notice the verb: *giving*. Not “having his life taken.” Not “being punished by God.” Giving. This is an active verb. Jesus gave his life. The confession does not describe a victim of divine wrath, sacrificed against his will to satisfy a legal requirement. It describes a person who gave, freely, deliberately, for the sins of the world.

And “for the sins of the world.” Not for the sins of believers. Not for the sins of Israel. The world. All of creation. All of the human and non-human order. The scope is as wide as it can possibly be. Whatever Jesus accomplished on the cross, it wasn’t a private transaction for a select group. It was for the sins of *the world*, for the fear and the misdirected trust and the hiding and the rebellion that we looked at in the ministry list, for the whole tangled mess of human existence that has been living out of alignment with its own belovedness. The world was afraid, and Jesus took that fear into himself, and the confession is about to tell us what happened next.

“God raised this Jesus from the dead.”

This is the sentence that changes everything. And I need you to see two words in it before we go any further.

This Jesus.

Not a generalized Jesus. Not a conceptual Christ. Not a spiritual principle or a cosmic idea. *This* Jesus, the one the confession just described. The one who preached good news to the poor and ate with outcasts. The one who was unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition. The one who was crucified, who suffered, who gave his life. That one. The specific one. The one with a history, with a body, with nail marks.

“This” is a word that refuses to let you abstract Christ into an idea you can shape to your own preferences. You do not get to skip the outcasts and the crucifixion and jump straight to Easter. You do not get to construct a comfortable Jesus who never challenged the religious establishment, never threatened the political order, never got his hands dirty with the people respectable society wanted to avoid. The Jesus God raised is *this* Jesus, the one who did all of those things and had all of those things done to him. If you want the

resurrection, you have to take the whole package.

I have a personal story about these two words. Years ago, I went looking for a copy of the Brief Statement of Faith on the Presbyterian Church's website. I found it, read through it, and realized that the word "this" was missing. The text online read "God raised Jesus from the dead." Not "God raised *this* Jesus from the dead." One word, dropped, and the entire force of the sentence changed.

I knew the people who worked in the office responsible for that web page, and they were exceptional - deeply faithful, theologically rigorous, meticulous in their work. They would never have removed that word on purpose. But somehow it fell out. And I think the reason it fell out is instructive: "God raised Jesus from the dead" feels sufficient. Of course it is Jesus. Who else would it be? The word "this" can feel unnecessarily specific, almost redundant. And that instinct - the instinct to generalize, to smooth over the specific, to assume we know who we're talking about - is exactly what the word "this" is there to prevent. It is there because we need to be reminded, every time, that the Jesus God raised is not a figure of our imagination.

He is a specific person who did specific things, and the resurrection is God's vindication of that specific life.

"Vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal."

The present participles are back. Vindicating, breaking, delivering, all ongoing, all continuous, all present tense. The pattern we identified in the ministry list holds here too. "God raised" is past tense, it happened, in history, on a specific morning. But what that raising accomplishes is described in present tense, because the resurrection is not a completed event with a finished result. It is an ongoing reality.

Start with "vindicating." The religious and political systems rendered a verdict: guilty. Guilty of blasphemy. Guilty of sedition. Sentenced to death. And that should have been the end of the story. The powerful get to write history. The dead do not get to appeal. But God overruled the verdict. Not on a technicality. Not through a backroom deal. By raising the body they killed. The evidence of their injustice is walking around. You cannot

brush aside a person who is standing in front of you.

Vindication means the people who condemned Jesus were wrong, and God is making that publicly, bodily, undeniably clear. The life Jesus lived, the preaching and the healing and the eating with outcasts, was not blasphemy. It was not sedition. It was sinless. It was the truest, most faithful, most perfectly aligned human life ever lived. And God’s response to the systems that killed that life is not a philosophical argument. It is a resurrection. The body is back. The tomb is empty. The verdict is overturned.

“Breaking the power of sin and evil.” The resurrection is not just the vindication of one life. It is the beginning of something cosmic. The apostle Paul described Jesus as the “firstborn from the dead” - not someone who happened to come back to life, but the first instance of what God is doing to all of creation. The resurrection is a preview, a down payment, the opening move in a transformation that hasn’t yet finished. Sin and evil had their best shot - they killed the Son of God, and it wasn’t enough. The power is broken. Not eliminated, not yet - we still live in a world full of sin and evil, and the confession will address that. But broken. The

grip is loosened. The last word does not belong to the cross. It belongs to the empty tomb.

“Delivering us from death to life eternal.” And here is the destination - *life eternal*, which in the Greek of the New Testament is not “life that goes on forever after you die.” It is *zoe*, the fullness of life, the flourishing life, the life that participates in God’s own reality. The delivery is from death, from everything that diminishes, destroys, and dehumanizes - to zoe, to the life God always intended for us. And “delivering” is present tense. It is happening now. The resurrection opened a door that hasn’t closed.

The confession began this section with injustice - an innocent man condemned by the collaboration of religion and empire. It ends with life eternal. The arc is staggering. From the worst thing human beings have ever done - killing God, to the best thing God has ever done - raising the dead. And the connection between them is not a transaction. The confession does not say God required the death in order to provide the life. It says Jesus *gave* his life, and God *raised* this Jesus, and the result is vindication, broken power, and deliverance.

That's what always already loved looks like when it meets the worst the world can do. It does not mean that love always prevents the suffering. There are times when it does - times when grace intervenes, when the hand is stayed, when the worst does not come to pass. But there are also times when nothing and no one intervenes, when the nails go in and the sky goes dark. And even then, especially then - love refuses. Absolutely, bodily, permanently refuses to let death be the end of the story.

God raised this Jesus from the dead.

And the story is not over.

Part Three: We Trust in God

Chapter 5: Whom Jesus Called Abba, Father

The confession turns again. Having told us who Jesus is and what Jesus does, his ministry, his death, his resurrection, it now moves to the God behind all of it. The God Jesus reveals.

We trust in God, whom Jesus called Abba, Father.

“We trust.” For the third time, the confession uses this word. We trusted in Jesus Christ. Now we trust in God. The posture has not changed. It is still pistis, still the whole-person orientation of trust and allegiance, not mental agreement with a set of propositions. But notice what the confession does with the trust this time. It does not say “we trust in God the Father” or “we trust in God Almighty” or “we trust in the Creator of

heaven and earth.” It says we trust in God *whom Jesus called Abba, Father.* Our knowledge of this God comes through Jesus. We do not arrive at God through philosophical reasoning or abstract theology. We know who God is because Jesus showed us, and one of the ways Jesus showed us was by how he prayed.

That phrase, “whom Jesus called”, is doing quiet but essential work. It roots our understanding of God in the devotional life of a specific person. Jesus prayed, and when he prayed, he called God *Abba*. This is not theology handed down from a lecture hall. It is a word overheard in prayer. Mark’s gospel preserves the moment: in the Garden of Gethsemane, facing his death, Jesus prayed “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” The most intimate address to God in the entire New Testament comes at the moment of greatest anguish. Jesus, fully human, facing the depths of human pain that the confession just described, turns to God and says *Abba*.

Now look at what the confession does with that word. It says “Abba, Father.” Not just

Abba. Not just Father. Both, separated by a comma.

That comma is doing the same kind of work as the comma in “fully human, fully God”, holding two realities side by side without resolving the tension between them. Is “Father” a translation of “Abba,” explaining the Aramaic for readers who do not know it? That’s how Mark’s gospel uses the phrase - Abba followed by the Greek equivalent. Or is “Father” adding something - not translating but expanding, so that we hear both the intimacy of Abba and the authority of Father? Both readings are possible. Both are true. The confession, being art and not legislation, does not force you to choose.

But feel the difference between the two words. Abba is intimate. It is a child’s word for a parent, not the formal “Father” of a legal document but the warm, close, trusting address of a child who knows they are safe. Some scholars have pushed back against the old claim that Abba is equivalent to “Daddy”, the word is not quite that informal, but it is undeniably personal, undeniably relational, undeniably warm. It is what you call someone you trust with your life.

Father carries different weight. It carries authority, provision, protection. It carries the weight of the patriarchal tradition, for better and for worse. It carries the baptismal formula - “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”, which is the language that connects every Christian baptism across every tradition and every century. When the church baptizes, it uses this word. That is not incidental. The PCUSA, in drafting this confession, deliberately chose to maintain Father language in part because it is the language all Christians from all times have used in the most foundational sacrament of the faith. It is not retrograde. It is *catholic* in the small-c sense - universal, shared, connecting us to the church across time and space.

So “Abba, Father” holds intimacy and authority together. A God who is as close as a parent’s whisper and as sovereign as a king’s decree. A God you can crawl into the lap of and a God who holds the universe in place. The confession doesn’t ask you to pick one. It gives you both, in two words and a comma, because both are true and you need both to understand who this God is.

There is something else happening here that I don’t want you to miss, because it reveals something about how the confession is constructed.

The drafters of the Brief Statement knew that Father language is contested. They knew that for many people, particularly women who have been excluded or diminished by patriarchal religion, the word “Father” for God carries pain. They were not unaware of this. The confession itself will use maternal imagery for God just a few lines from now - “like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child”, and it will affirm the ordination of women in the Spirit section. The drafters were not reactionaries clinging to old language out of stubbornness. They were making a deliberate choice.

And the choice is strategically brilliant. By grounding the God section in “Abba, Father”, language that is traditional, ecumenical, and anchored in Jesus’s own prayer, the confession earns the trust of traditional readers. It signals: we aren’t abandoning the faith you know. We are standing in the stream of the historic church. And then, having earned that trust, the confession spends it. The very next lines will declare that this Father

God “makes everyone equally in God’s image, male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community.” The radical equality claim comes immediately after the traditional language. Father earns the trust; equality spends it. The drafters understood something that theologians do not always grasp: correct theology is also good strategic rhetoric. When you get the theology right, it does its own persuasive work.

One more thing. The confession says Jesus *called* God Abba, Father. Called - past tense. This is one of the few places in the confession where a past-tense verb is doing exactly the right work. Jesus called God this. It is a historical fact about a specific person’s prayer life. We are not speculating about what God might be like. We are reporting what Jesus said. And because the previous section established that Jesus is fully human and fully God - that when Jesus acts, God acts. What Jesus called God is not merely one man’s opinion. It is God’s own self-disclosure. God is telling us, through Jesus’s prayer, who God is. Abba. Father. Intimate and authoritative. Close and sovereign. The God who can be addressed by a child and the God who holds the power of resurrection.

That is who we trust. And the confession is about to tell us what this God does.

Chapter 6: Created and Makes

If the previous chapter gave us the name, Abba, Father, this chapter gives us the character. And the character of this God turns out to be more radical, more generous, and more present than most of us have been taught to expect.

In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God's image, male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community.

This is one of the most packed sentences in the entire confession. It contains a claim about creation, a claim about humanity, a claim about equality, and a claim about community, all in one breath. But before we dig into any of that, I want you to notice the verbs. "Created" - past tense. "Makes" - present tense. Two different tenses in one sentence, and the difference between them is not a grammatical accident. It is a theological claim.

“God created the world good.” That happened. It is a completed act. The world exists, and its existence is good - not neutral, not fallen from the start, not a mistake or a testing ground or a prison for souls. Good. The confession is clear about this, and it matters, because there are versions of Christianity that treat the material world with suspicion, as if creation itself were the problem. The confession disagrees. God made it, and God called it good.

But then: “God makes everyone equally in God’s image.” Present tense. Not “God made.” Not “God once upon a time stamped the divine image on the first humans and then stepped back.” God *makes*, right now, continuously, ongoingly. The creation of the world is a completed event. The making of human beings in God’s image is a present-tense, never-finished reality.

Sit with that for a moment, because the pastoral implications are enormous. If God *makes* you in God’s image, present tense, then the image of God in you is not a historical artifact that you might have damaged beyond repair. It is a living reality. God is making you in God’s image right now. Today. In whatever condition you are in, whatever you have done,

whatever has been done to you. You cannot fall out of the image of God, because God has not stopped making you in it.

“Sovereign love.” The confession places these two words together, and both of them matter.

Sovereignty is a word that pervades Presbyterian theology. The Book of Order, the second half of our constitution, says that God does everything “in the sovereign freedom of righteousness and love.” For Presbyterians, sovereignty means that God is in control. Not a passive observer, not a distant watchmaker, not a deity who set things in motion and walked away. God is actively, presently, sovereignly at work.

But sovereignty has a reputation problem. In the hands of some theologians, sovereignty has been used to justify a God who is controlling, capricious, even cruel, a God who predestines some to salvation and others to damnation with no regard for human agency. That version of sovereignty is a horror. It turns God into a tyrant.

The confession does not let you go there. It does not say “in sovereign power.” It says “in sovereign love.” Sovereignty and love are not

two separate attributes that God happens to have. They are one thing. God’s sovereignty is loving, and God’s love is sovereign. God’s love cannot be coerced, cannot be constrained, cannot be overruled, not even by our rejection of it. That is what makes it sovereign. And God’s power is never exercised apart from love, never arbitrary, never cruel, never indifferent to the creatures it acts upon. That is what makes it love.

C. S. Lewis wrote of Aslan in the Narnia stories: “He’s not safe, but he’s good.” That is the confession’s God. Sovereign love is not tame. It is not a God who will leave you alone when you want to be left alone. It is a God whose love has total freedom and total power, who will pursue you and hold you and refuse to let you go, not because God needs to control you, but because God loves you too much to abandon you to the smaller things you keep trying to belong to.

The word doesn’t need to be replaced. It needs to be washed off. Underneath the distortions, sovereignty means this: nothing gets to be God except God. And God is love.

“Everyone equally in God’s image, male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community.”

The word “equally” is an adverb, and it modifies “makes.” It describes God’s action, not an abstract principle. God does not make some people more in the divine image than others. God does not make the image stronger in one race and weaker in another, more present in men and less present in women. Equally. The image of God is distributed without preference, without hierarchy, without exception. This is not a political statement dressed in theological language. It is a theological statement with political implications, and the implications are unavoidable.

“Male and female.” Here is the merism again, the same poetic device we saw in “in life and in death.” Male and female are the two poles, and the merism means the whole range. Not two boxes but a spectrum. The full breadth of human being, in all its variety, bears the image of God. The confession does not say “male or female.” It says “male and female”, both, together, the whole range between and including them. God’s image is not in one

gender or the other. It is in the fullness of human diversity.

“Of every race and people.” The scope widens further. Not just gender but ethnicity, culture, nationality, every human distinction we use to sort ourselves into categories of more and less valuable. The image of God crosses all of them. Every single one.

“To live as one community.” And here is the purpose clause. This is God’s design specification. Human beings were made in the image of a triune God, a God who is community within Godself, and we were made *to live as one community.* This isn’t a nice aspiration. It is not a goal we might get around to eventually. It is the reason we were made. The image of God is communal by nature, because the God whose image we bear is communal by nature, and that means every division by race, gender, or people is not just morally wrong. It is ontologically wrong, wrong at the level of being itself, a distortion of what we fundamentally are. It distorts the image it claims to bear. You cannot reflect a communal God in isolation. You cannot bear the image of a God who is three-in-one while insisting that some of the “ones” matter less than others.

And then the rupture.

But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator. Ignoring God's commandments, we violate the image of God in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.

"But." One word, and everything changes. God's intention has just been stated - sovereign love, a good creation, everyone equally in the divine image, living as one community. And immediately, without any buffer, without a golden age or a period of innocence, the confession names the fracture. But. We rebel. We hide.

Those two verbs are a deliberate pairing, and they hold two theological traditions together. "Rebel" is the classic understanding of sin that stretches back through Augustine and dominates the Reformed tradition: sin as pride, as self-assertion, as the creature trying to seize the place of the Creator. But "hide" names something different. Feminist theologians like Valerie Saiving and Judith Plaskow pointed out decades ago that the pride model does not account for everyone's experience. For many people, particularly women, but not only women - sin is not too

much self. It is too little. It is self-erasure, self-negation, the failure to show up. Hiding. The confession holds both without choosing. Rebellion and hiding are both failures of trust. Both are fear responses. And the confession, which built its entire foundation on trust, now names what happens when trust fails.

"Ignoring God's commandments." The commandments are not arbitrary rules imposed by a demanding God. They are the practices that form us into the community God designed us to be. They are the shape of discipleship, the way children by grace become disciples by practice. Ignoring them is refusing the formation God offers. It is not that God will stop loving you if you ignore the commandments. Line 1 has not changed. You still belong. The image of God in you has not dimmed, God is still making you in that image, present tense. But formation is a gift that has to be received, and ignoring the commandments is declining the gift. You are no less loved. You are no less God's. But you are missing out on the life those practices were designed to shape you into.

And then the cascade: "we violate the image of God in others and ourselves", both directions, outward aggression and inward diminishment. "Accept lies as truth", every

distortion we embrace about God, about ourselves, about each other. “Exploit neighbor and nature” - treating people and the planet as resources to be consumed rather than gifts to be honored. “And threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care” - entrusted, not given. The planet is not our possession. It belongs to God. We are stewards, not owners. And we are failing.

Notice that every one of these verbs is present tense. We rebel. We hide. We violate, accept, exploit, threaten. The confession is not describing something that happened once in a garden a long time ago. It is describing what we are doing right now. Sin is not a past event. It is an ongoing condition - a present-tense reality that mirrors, in dark reversal, the present-tense reality of God’s image-making.

We deserve God’s condemnation.

The confession does not flinch. This is a complete, unequivocal sentence, and I will not soften it. The good news is only good news if the bad news is real. If we have done what the confession just described, rebelled, hidden, violated, exploited, threatened, then condemnation is what we deserve. The confession looks at the mess we have made

and calls it what it is. Not a mistake. Not an understandable lapse. Not “we’re doing our best.” We deserve condemnation.

And then -

Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.

“Yet.” Someone once observed that “yet” is the greatest word in the entire document, and I’m inclined to agree. Not “but”, “yet.” “But” would be a simple pivot, a contrast. “Yet” has a quality of persistence, of refusal. “Yet” means: despite everything you just heard, despite all of it, despite the rebellion and the hiding and the exploitation and the deserved condemnation, God acts. God doesn’t freeze. God doesn’t withdraw. God doesn’t give us what we deserve. Yet. God acts.

And how does God act? With justice *and* mercy. Not justice or mercy - justice and mercy, unified, inseparable. These are not opposing impulses that God must balance, as if mercy comes at the expense of justice or justice requires the suppression of mercy. Redeeming creation *is* the just thing to do, because creation belongs to God. Mercy is what happens when condemnation is deserved and not delivered. And grace, which the confession named all the way back in the

preamble, is the prior initiative that makes both justice and mercy possible.

This is where the always-already-loved framework is at its most rigorous. Not “God was never really angry.” Not “the bad news isn’t that bad.” The bad news is terrible. We genuinely deserve condemnation. And God’s response is not condemnation but redemption. That is not softness. It is sovereign love, the same sovereign love that opened this section, refusing to let our failure be the final word. God’s love is sovereign, which means it cannot be defeated. Not even by us.

We deserve condemnation. Yet God acts. That “yet” is the hinge on which the entire confession turns. Everything before it describes the problem. Everything after it describes God’s response. And the response, as we are about to see, stretches all the way back to Abraham and Sarah and all the way forward to the end of time.

Chapter 7: God Is Faithful Still

The confession has just named our condition with unflinching honesty, rebellion, hiding, exploitation, deserved condemnation, and then pivoted on the word “yet” to declare that God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation. Now it tells us how.

In everlasting love, the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people to bless all families of the earth. Hearing their cry, God delivered the children of Israel from the house of bondage. Loving us still, God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant. Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still.

This is one of the most beautiful passages in the entire Brief Statement, and it moves at a pace that rewards slow reading. Every phrase is doing theological work. Let’s take it carefully.

“The God of Abraham and Sarah.” Not “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” which is the formula embedded deep in the biblical tradition. The confession chose differently. It named the founding pair rather than the patriarchal lineage, and in doing so it foregrounded partnership over dynasty. This is not the story of a great man and the generations that followed him. It is the story of two people through whom God chose to work. Sarah is not an afterthought. She is named alongside Abraham as a co-participant in what God is doing. There would be no covenant people without her.

This matters, and not only because of what it says about women in the story of God. It sets up something the confession will say explicitly in the Spirit section - that God calls women and men to all ministries of the Church. The inclusion of Sarah here and the affirmation of women’s ordination later are not isolated gestures toward inclusivity. They are a consistent conviction about how God works: through partnership, through both, not through one alone. That conviction runs through the entire document.

“Chose a covenant people.” Two words here deserve attention: “covenant” and “chose.”

The confession does not say “a chosen people.” It says “a covenant people.” The difference matters. “Chosen people” centers identity, who we are. It answers the question “what makes us special?” and the answer is “God chose us.” That can calcify into exceptionalism very quickly. “Covenant people” centers relationship, whose we are. It answers the question “what are we for?” and the answer is “we are in covenant with God.” Covenant is not about status. It is about obligation, mutuality, promise. A covenant has terms. It asks something of both parties.

Except that this covenant does not ask something of both parties, not in the way we might expect. The covenant God made with Abraham in Genesis 15 is one of the most remarkable passages in the Hebrew scriptures. In the ancient Near East, covenant rituals involved both parties walking between the halves of sacrificed animals, essentially saying: may this be done to me if I break this covenant. But in Genesis 15, God puts Abraham to sleep. Only God - represented by a smoking firepot and a flaming torch - passes between the pieces. Abraham does not walk.

God walks alone. God takes both sides of the obligation onto Godself.

This is a unilateral covenant. God is saying: I will be bound by this whether you hold up your end or not. The covenant's existence does not depend on human performance. It depends on God. This is thoroughly Reformed theology - the tradition has always distinguished between covenants that depend on human faithfulness and the covenant of grace that depends on God's faithfulness alone. And it is thoroughly consistent with the always-already-loved framework. If belonging is unconditional (line 1), and if the covenant is unilateral (Genesis 15), then our failure to live into the covenant does not dissolve it. It cannot. God walked between the pieces alone.

But the covenant has a purpose: "to bless all families of the earth." And a purpose requires action. You can be chosen without your consent, but you can't bless without your participation. The choosing is God's. The blessing is the work that flows from the choosing. This is where discipleship enters the covenant. God establishes the relationship unilaterally. The vocation that flows from that relationship requires our response.

The Presbyterian Book of Order names this dynamic among the great themes of the Reformed tradition: “the election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation.” Both words matter - service and salvation. Election is for the benefit of the elected; salvation is real and it belongs to them. But service is the first word, and that ordering is not accidental. The primary purpose of election is outward, toward others, toward the world, toward the blessing of all families of the earth. Salvation is the gift the elected receive. Service is the vocation the elected are given. Blessed to be a blessing. If you take your election and turn it entirely inward, if you make it only about your own security or your own superiority, you have neglected the purpose for which you were chosen. Election that doesn’t flow outward has forgotten its first word.

“Hearing their cry, God delivered the children of Israel from the house of bondage.”

The story leaps forward from Abraham and Sarah to the Exodus, from covenant to deliverance. God hears the cry of the enslaved and acts. This is not abstract theology. This is a God who responds to suffering, who moves

toward the people in pain, who liberates the captive. The same God whose ministry in Christ would include “preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives” was already doing this work in Egypt. The pattern was always there.

“Loving us still, God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.”

Two things to notice. First, “loving us still”, the word “still” carries enormous weight. It means: despite the rebellion, despite the hiding, despite the exploitation, despite the deserved condemnation. Still. God has not stopped loving. The unilateral covenant holds because the love that established it hasn’t wavered.

Second, “God makes us heirs.” Present tense. Not “made us heirs” at some point in the past. Makes. Right now. The covenant that began with Abraham and Sarah is being extended, in the present tense, to include us - through Christ, who is the fulfillment of the covenant promise. This is the confession insisting, as it has from the beginning, that God’s work is not finished. It is happening now.

And then the confession gives us two images. Not arguments. Not doctrines. Images.

“Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child.”

A nursing child has no capacity to hold up their end of anything. The child cannot feed itself, cannot sustain itself, cannot reciprocate. The mother’s commitment to the child is entirely unilateral. The child’s only role is to receive. And the confession says God will not forsake *even this*, the most helpless, most dependent, most incapable-of-reciprocating relationship we can imagine. That is the covenant. That’s how God holds us.

“Like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home.”

Now the other side. The prodigal has already failed spectacularly. Has already taken everything and squandered it. Has already, by every reasonable measure, disqualified himself from the family’s welcome. And the father does not wait at the door with conditions. The father *runs*. In the ancient world, a patriarch does not run. It is undignified, beneath his station. But this father cannot help himself. The child is home,

and the father's response is not "let us discuss what you have done." It is sprinting down the road with open arms.

Two images. The one who never had the capacity to earn it and the one who had the chance and blew it completely. The nursing infant and the prodigal son. And God's response to both is the same: faithfulness. Not reluctant faithfulness. Not disappointed faithfulness. A mother who *will not forsake*. A father who *runs*.

This is what a unilateral covenant looks like when it encounters human helplessness and human failure. It looks like a God who will not let go, not because our failure does not matter, but because God's faithfulness is greater than our failure. The prophet Jonah knew this and hated it. His complaint in the fourth chapter of his book is essentially: "I knew you were gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Jonah understood God's character perfectly. He just could not stand it. He wanted a God who keeps score. Instead he got this God, the one who runs toward the failures and nurses the helpless and refuses, absolutely refuses, to give up.

"God is faithful still."

Still. That word again, the same word that appeared in “loving us still” just a few lines earlier. Persistence. Refusal to quit. Love that outlasts everything we throw at it. The Hebrew scriptures have a word for this kind of love: *hesed*, steadfast love, covenant faithfulness, lovingkindness. *Hesed* is what you call love that refuses to quit even when the other party has given it every reason to. It is not a feeling. It is a commitment that persists through and despite failure. And it is unilateral by nature, because if it depended on both parties it would just be a contract.

God is faithful still. Four words. And they contain the entire argument of the always-already-loved framework: a God whose love preceded us, whose covenant does not depend on us, whose faithfulness outlasts our failure, and who, when we have been helpless or when we have been prodigal, responds not with condemnation but with open arms and a refusal to let go.

That is who we trust. That is who we have always belonged to. And the confession is not finished yet, because there is still the Spirit’s work to describe, and the Spirit is about to show us what this faithful God does in and through the gathered people.

Part Four: We Trust in God the Holy Spirit

Chapter 8: Everywhere the Giver and Renewer of Life

For the fourth and final time, the confession says “we trust.”

We trust in God the Holy Spirit, everywhere the giver and renewer of life.

The pattern is complete. We trust in Jesus Christ. We trust in God. We trust in God the Holy Spirit. Three declarations of trust, one for each person of the Trinity, the same pistis each time, the whole-person orientation of allegiance and reliance that has been the confession’s posture from the beginning. The structure itself is a Trinitarian confession: the way we stand before God is the same regardless of which person of the Trinity we are encountering, because we are encountering one God.

If the Christ section told us what God looks like in human form, and the God section told us who this God has always been, the Spirit section tells us what God is doing right now - in and through the gathered people. The Spirit is where belonging and trust become action.

“Everywhere the giver and renewer of life.”

Start with “everywhere,” because that word is doing something most readers will not expect.

If you come from a tradition shaped by charismatic or broadly evangelical spirituality, you may hear “everywhere” and think of the Spirit moving through nature, through individual hearts, through private moments of inspiration and guidance. The Spirit is everywhere - in the sunset, in the still small voice, in the feeling you get when you sense God leading you personally. That is the dominant popular understanding of the Holy Spirit in American Christianity: the Spirit as individual presence, inner guide, personal companion.

The confession is making a different claim. “Everywhere” is a place word, and the place the Spirit inhabits is the church. Not the church as a building or an institution, but the

church as the gathered people of God - scattered across the globe, present in every culture and every century. The Spirit is everywhere because the church is everywhere. Where God's people gather, the Spirit is at work. That is the consistent testimony of Scripture and the consistent conviction of the Reformed tradition.

This needs to be said clearly because it cuts against a deeply held assumption: Reformed theology does not talk about the Holy Spirit apart from the church. This is not to say they are the same thing. They are emphatically not. But Scripture is remarkably consistent in showing that God, through the Spirit, chooses to work in, through, and with the community of faith. The Spirit gathers. The Spirit forms. The Spirit sustains. The Spirit sends. And all of it happens in the context of a people.

Could God work otherwise? Of course. God is God. But this is what God chooses. The pattern is so consistent across both testaments, from the Spirit hovering over the waters at creation to the Spirit descending at Pentecost to form a community, that I'm not interested in arguing about whether God *could* do it differently. The fact is that God *does* it this way. The Spirit's chosen mode of operation is through the gathered people. That

is the baseline, and I believe it is what the confession means when it says “everywhere.”

This matters pastorally because a great deal of damage gets done when people assume the Spirit is communicating with or working through them as individuals over and against, or in spite of, a community. “The Spirit told me” becomes the final word, and there’s no accountability, no correction, no community to test the claim against. The Reformed tradition insists that the Spirit’s work is communal precisely because an unaccountable claim to private revelation is dangerous. It was dangerous in the first century, and it is dangerous now. The Spirit doesn’t freelance.

That does not mean God never communicates with individuals. The Spirit called Abraham. An angel came to Mary. Christ himself appeared to Paul on the Damascus road. But every one of those individual encounters resulted in a communal vocation. Abraham became the father of a people. Mary bore Christ for the world. Paul planted churches across the Mediterranean. The pattern is not “the Spirit never speaks to individuals.” The pattern is “when the Spirit speaks to individuals, it is always in service of the community.” The call is individual. The

purpose is communal. There is no example in Scripture of God showing up to someone and saying: this is just for you, enjoy it privately. The encounter always sends you somewhere, to someone, for something bigger than yourself.

“The giver and renewer of life.”

Two roles. Two different actions. And to understand them, we need to understand what “life” means in this context.

In the New Testament, there are two primary Greek words for life. *Bios* refers to biological existence, the span of your days, the stuff of physical survival. *Zoe* is something different. *Zoe* is the quality of life that comes from God, fullness, flourishing, the life Jesus speaks of when he says “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” When the New Testament talks about eternal life, the word is zoe, and it doesn’t primarily mean life that goes on forever after you die. It means life that participates in God’s own reality. It is qualitative before it is quantitative.

In the Hebrew scriptures, the closest parallel is *chayyim,* which is almost always plural in Hebrew, lives, not life. It carries a sense of

vitality, vigor, communal flourishing. It is the word God uses in Deuteronomy when saying "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse, choose life." That is not "choose to keep breathing." That is "choose the way of flourishing that God offers."

And then there is *ruach*, breath, wind, spirit, which is the animating force in Genesis 2 when God breathes into the dust and the human becomes a living being. Without ruach, there's no chayyim. The Spirit's connection to life is as old as creation itself.

So "life" in this confession is not biological existence. It is zoe. It is chayyim. It is the fullness of flourishing that God intends for creation - relational, communal, qualitative, present-tense. And the Spirit is both the giver and the renewer of that life.

"Giver" means the Spirit is the source. The Spirit originates the flourishing life. Where zoe exists, where people are truly alive, truly flourishing, truly participating in God's reality, the Spirit is the one who made it happen.

"Renewer" means that when that flourishing gets damaged, by sin, by fear, by the rebellion and hiding we just encountered in the previous chapter. The Spirit restores it. The

Spirit doesn’t just start life and walk away. The Spirit comes back and makes it new. Gives it again. And both “giver” and “renewer” are present participles - ongoing, continuous, happening right now.

Which means we can’t become whole on our own. If the Spirit gives and renews life in community, if the Spirit doesn’t freelance, then flourishing isn’t a solo project. You don’t achieve zoe through private spiritual discipline or individual effort. You receive it in the context of the gathered people, where the Spirit is at work. The person who withdraws from community in times of stress and shame, and I know this person, because I’m this person - is pulling away from the very location where the Spirit gives and renews life. Hiding, as the confession just told us, is one of the root forms of sin. And what makes hiding so self-defeating is that it cuts you off from the means of renewal. Not because God cannot find you. God is a mother who will not forsake, a father who runs, but because the Spirit’s chosen instrument of renewal is the gathered people. When you withdraw, you aren’t just isolating from other humans. You are pulling away from the place where zoe happens.

The Spirit is everywhere - through the church, among the people, in the gathering. And the Spirit is giving and renewing life - zoe, chayyim, the flourishing God intends, right now. Continuously. In present tense.

That is the foundation for everything the Spirit section will say next: about justification, about freedom, about Scripture and sacraments, about courage in a broken world. All of it flows from this: the Spirit is the giver and renewer of life, and the Spirit does this work among the gathered people of God.

Chapter 9: Set Free

This may be the chapter that matters most for people who have spent their lives believing they aren't enough - not faithful enough, not good enough, not believing hard enough to deserve God's love. If that is you, read slowly. What follows is good news.

The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church.

Three actions in one sentence: justifies, sets free, binds together. Each one deserves careful attention, because the confession is doing something with them that is both deeply traditional and quietly revolutionary.

"The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith."

If you have spent any time in Protestant Christianity, you have heard this language before. "Justified by grace through faith" is

the Reformation's signature phrase. It is the conviction that broke Martin Luther open, the engine of the entire Reformed tradition, the heartbeat of Protestant theology. Justification by grace through faith. We know these words.

But we may not know what they mean, because over the centuries, justification has been encased in a legal framework that, while attempting to explain *how* justification works, has changed what justification *is*.

The dominant Protestant explanation goes something like this: God is a judge. We are defendants. We are guilty. But Christ paid the penalty on our behalf, and so God declares us "not guilty" - justified. Acquitted. The books are balanced. The legal transaction is complete. This is forensic justification, and it has shaped how most Western Christians understand the word.

The problem is that this framework, while attempting to honor the seriousness of sin, creates difficulties that the confession itself does not support. If justification is a legal verdict, then it requires a change in God's disposition, from condemning to accepting, from wrath to grace. But the confession has spent its entire arc telling us that God's disposition has never changed. We have

always already belonged to God. We have always already been loved. God is faithful still. A God whose posture toward us shifts from judgment to acceptance is not the God this confession describes.

So what does justification mean if it isn't a legal verdict?

The word itself offers a clue. To justify can mean to set right, to bring into proper alignment. Think of justifying text on a page: the letters are not being judged. They are being aligned. Things that were out of order are being put back into their proper relationship.

That's what the Spirit does. The Spirit justifies, sets right, realigns, restores proper orientation. We have been living out of alignment with the reality of our belovedness. We have been rebelling, hiding, ignoring, exploiting, living as if we don't belong to God, as if the love were not there, as if we had to earn what was already given. Justification is the Spirit bringing us back into contact with what was always true. It does not change God's posture toward us. It changes our posture toward God and toward ourselves. It realigns us with reality.

“By grace through faith.” By God’s initiative, grace - through our trust - pistis. The realignment happens not because we earned it or figured it out or performed our way into it. It happens because God moved first and we responded with trust. Grace is the reason there is a relationship at all. Faith is how we orient ourselves within that relationship. And both are gifts, even the trust is something the Spirit makes possible.

“Sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor.”

Look at what the Spirit’s justification produces. Not a verdict. Not a legal status. Freedom. Specifically, freedom to do two things simultaneously: accept ourselves and love God and neighbor.

That word “and” is carrying the weight of the world. Not “sets us free to accept ourselves *and then* to love God and neighbor,” as if self-acceptance were a stage you complete before moving on to the next task. And. Simultaneously. Both at the same time.

This matters because the sequential version, first learn to love yourself, then love others, has become one of the most effective excuses

for never getting around to the second part. “I can’t love anyone else until I learn to love myself.” It sounds wise. It sounds like healthy boundaries. But it can become a perpetual deferral. There is always more self-work to do, always another layer of self-acceptance to achieve, and meanwhile the neighbor goes unloved because I am still working on me.

The confession closes that escape route. The Spirit does both at once because they aren’t two separate capacities. They are one freedom. You discover yourself loved in the very act of loving. You accept your own worth in the very act of showing up for someone else. The acceptance and the love happen together, in community, because the Spirit who justifies you is the same Spirit who binds you to your neighbor.

And “accept ourselves” is a remarkable phrase to find in a confessional document. The confession does not say “accept God’s verdict” or “accept Christ as Lord.” Accept *ourselves*. The Spirit liberates us from self-rejection. From the relentless inner voice that says you aren’t enough, that you haven’t earned your place, that you are fundamentally unacceptable. If the root problem of sin is forgetting our belonging, forgetting that we are always already loved, then justification

restores our capacity to see ourselves as God sees us. The Spirit aligns us with the truth of our belovedness, and the result is that we can finally stop fighting ourselves.

This is not narcissism. It is the prerequisite for love. You cannot give what you don't have. You cannot love your neighbor as yourself if you can't accept yourself. But you also cannot accept yourself in isolation, because the self you are accepting is a self made in the image of a communal God whose nature is love. Self-acceptance and love of neighbor are the same movement experienced from two directions. Inward: I am loved. Outward: I love. And. Simultaneously.

"And binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church."

The binding is the Spirit's action, not ours. We do not join the Church in the deepest sense. The Spirit binds us into it. This is something that happens to us when the Spirit justifies and frees us. You get aligned with reality, you accept yourself and love your neighbor, and you discover you have been bound into a body. The Spirit did that. Not your decision to attend, not your

denominational preference, not your choice to sign a membership card.

“All believers.” The confession uses this word, and I need to be honest about it: it is the one word in this section that gives me pause. After everything we have said about pistis, about trust rather than cognitive assent, about allegiance rather than mental agreement, the English word “believers” can sound like it introduces a category. An in and an out. Those who believe and those who do not. And that sits uncomfortably with a confession that opened by declaring that *we* belong to God, unconditionally, with no mechanism and no transaction.

But here is what I think the confession is doing. It has been saying “we trust” throughout, never “we believe.” The pistis framework is already established. So “believers” in this context does not mean “people who hold correct doctrines in their heads.” It means the trusters - the ones oriented in pistis toward this God. And who does the orienting? The Spirit. The Spirit justifies. The Spirit sets free. The Spirit binds. If trust is the Spirit’s work in us rather than our achievement, then “believers” may not be a category we self-select into. It may be a description of what the Spirit is doing in

people - the trust that the Spirit creates, the orientation the Spirit produces.

I will not pretend this resolves every tension. The relationship between the universal belonging of line 1 and the particular community of the church is a tension the confession holds rather than resolves. But I do think the confession is not drawing a line between the worthy and the unworthy. It is describing what the Spirit produces: a body, bound together, in which people are being justified, freed, and oriented in trust toward a God who has always already loved them.

“The one body of Christ, the Church.” Body of Christ, comma, the Church. That comma is definitional, the same construction as “Abba, Father” and “fully human, fully God.” But why? Why does the confession place an equals sign between the body of Christ and the Church?

Because of everything we have already seen. Back in the Christ section, the confession described Jesus’s ministry in present-tense verbs: preaching, healing, eating, forgiving, calling. Those verbs are still active. The ministry hasn’t stopped. But Jesus is no longer walking the roads of Galilee, so where do those present-tense verbs live now? The

Spirit just answered that question. The Spirit binds us together into one body - Christ's body, and that body is where Christ's ongoing ministry takes place. The church is not an organization that admires Jesus from a distance. It is the community through which Christ continues to preach, heal, eat, forgive, and call. The body of Christ is the Church because the Church is where Christ's present-tense work happens. The comma is earned.

And it is one body, capital C Church - the Church universal, not a denomination, not a building, not an institution. Every tradition, every century, every place. The Presbyterian in your pew and the Orthodox Christian in Constantinople and the Pentecostal in Lagos and the Catholic in São Paulo. One body. Bound together by the same Spirit.

The Spirit justifies, frees, and binds. And the community that results from this work, the Church, the body of Christ, is where everything the confession says next will happen: Scripture read, Word proclaimed, sacraments celebrated, women and men called, courage given, idolatries unmasked, and the voices of the silenced finally heard.

Chapter 10: The Same Spirit

The confession now describes how the Spirit works in the Church - through what means, by what instruments. And it does so in a passage that is as practically grounded as anything in the document.

The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture, engages us through the Word proclaimed, claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.

One sentence. Five instruments. And an opening phrase, "the same Spirit", that anchors everything that follows in continuity.

"The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles."

"Same." That word is doing the work that "Holy One of Israel" did in the preamble -

insisting on continuity. This is not a new Spirit. This is not a Christian Spirit who showed up at Pentecost and started from scratch. This is the Spirit who was at work in the prophets of Israel and who continued working through the apostles of the church. One Spirit, continuous activity, spanning the entire biblical witness. The confession refuses to let you separate the testaments. The Spirit who inspired Isaiah is the Spirit who inspired Paul.

And what did the prophets and apostles do? The prophets held Torah up to the community and said: you have drifted. They were not mystics receiving private downloads from heaven. They were people steeped in the tradition - in the commandments, in the covenant, in the identity God had given this people, who could see that the community had fallen out of alignment and said so. Dramatically, publicly, sometimes outrageously. “Thus says the Lord” is not a report on a private conversation with God. It is a rhetorical form that carries the weight of Torah’s authority into a new situation. The prophet says “thus says the Lord” because what follows *is* what the Lord already said - in the covenant, in the commandments, in the identity God gave this people. Prophets were not bringing new information. They were

bringing old information that the community forgot or chose to ignore.

The apostles did the same thing on the other side of the resurrection. They witnessed to what God had done in Christ and built communities around that witness. They were not freelancing any more than the prophets were. They were founding and forming the church on the basis of what they had seen and heard.

Both prophets and apostles existed for the sake of the community. The prophets called the community back. The apostles called the community forward. Both were empowered by the same Spirit. And neither operated as a private individual with a special line to God - they operated as voices within and for the people of God.

Now look at what the confession does next, because this is one of those moments where the text is saying something quietly extraordinary.

“The same Spirit.. rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture, engages us through the Word proclaimed.”

Scripture and proclamation. Do you see the parallel? What the prophets did for the people and what the apostles did for the people is the same thing that Scripture and proclamation now do. The Spirit's work did not stop when the prophets and apostles died. It continued - through the texts they left behind and through the ongoing act of preaching. The prophets held Torah up to the community; Scripture does that now. The apostles proclaimed the good news and formed communities; the Word proclaimed does that now.

And notice: "the *same* Spirit." Not a lesser Spirit. Not a faint echo of what used to be. The same Spirit who put words in Amos's mouth and knocked Paul off his horse is the Spirit who rules our faith through Scripture and engages us through preaching. Which means that when Scripture is read in the community and when the Word is proclaimed from the pulpit, it isn't a memorial. It is not a historical reenactment. It is the same Spirit, presently active, doing the same work through the same means, calling the community back and calling the community forward. Scripture and preaching are living instruments of an active Spirit.

And both are communal. Scripture is read in community. The Word is proclaimed in community. The Spirit's ongoing prophetic and apostolic work happens where the people are gathered.

"Claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation."

From Scripture and preaching, the confession moves to the sacraments. And here we arrive at a beautifully Reformed construction: pulpit, font, and table - the three places where the Spirit meets the community through physical, tangible means.

The Word is how we are called into the community. The water is how we are grafted into the community. The bread and cup are how we are sustained in the community. Called, grafted, sustained. Each one is the Spirit working through embodied, material, communal means. No abstraction. No private spiritual experience. Actual voices proclaiming, actual water on actual skin, actual bread and actual wine consumed together.

And look at the verbs. The Spirit *claims* us in baptism. That is an ownership word. It reaches all the way back to line 1, “we belong to God.” Baptism is the moment the Spirit publicly enacts that belonging in the community. You already belonged, always already loved, but now it is marked, named, visible. The community witnesses it. The water makes the invisible reality tangible.

The Spirit *feeds* us at the table. That is sustenance language. Ongoing nourishment. You don’t eat once. You come back to the table again and again because you need to be fed again and again. The zoe, the flourishing life the Spirit gives and renews, requires regular nourishment. And it happens at a table, together. Which connects back to Jesus eating with outcasts in the ministry list. The table is where Jesus was in the Christ section, and the table is where the Spirit sustains the community in the Spirit section. The same meal. The same Spirit. The same God who has always drawn near through the act of sharing food.

“And calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.”

This line comes immediately after the sacraments, and its placement is not accidental. The Spirit who works through Scripture, preaching, baptism, and the table also calls the people who administer them. And that call extends to women and men equally. Not some ministries. All ministries. The word “all” leaves no room for qualification.

This is a confessional correction, and it is worth understanding what that means. The Scots Confession of 1560, one of the older documents in the Presbyterian Book of Confessions, reflects assumptions about women’s roles that the Brief Statement directly counters. Both confessions are in the same Book of Confessions. The church holds them together. The later confession does not erase the earlier one. It speaks a new and better word alongside it.

This is what it means to be Reformed. *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*, the church reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God. It is not a slogan. It is not an abstract principle. It is this: we said something, we learned better, we said the better thing, and we kept both documents

because we aren’t embarrassed by our own growth. The Scots Confession stays as a historical witness. The Brief Statement says: and now we know more.

This is one of the most powerful teaching moments in the entire confession, because it shows you what a living tradition looks like. A tradition that is being reformed - not reforming itself, but being reformed by God, is not a tradition that has lost its way. It is a tradition that is doing exactly what it has always confessed: *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei,* the church reformed and always *being reformed* according to the Word of God. The passive voice matters. We are not the agents of our own reformation. The Spirit is. Our role is to have the courage to accept it.

And that isn’t a small thing. Human beings have a deep consistency bias. We want to stay true to what we have always said, thought, believed, done. Changing our minds feels like betrayal. Admitting that the tradition got something wrong feels like the ground shifting under our feet. But the willingness to be reformed, to accept that the Spirit is leading the church further than our ancestors could see, may be the most deeply faithful thing we can do. It is an act of trust. It says:

we trust that God is still speaking, still working, still making things new. The church that reads the Brief Statement aloud on Sunday morning is a church that has had the courage to accept its own reformation. And courage, as it happens, is exactly what the next section of the confession is about.

Chapter 11: Courage in a Broken and Fearful World

The confession has described the Spirit's work inside the church - justifying, freeing, binding, working through Scripture and sacraments, calling women and men to ministry. Now it turns outward.

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.

Stop at the first five words. "In a broken and fearful world." Not bad. Not evil. Not sinful, terrible, horrible, no good. Broken and fearful. What a compassionate way to describe the human condition.

You do not condemn a broken thing. You mend it. You do not scold a fearful thing. You

comfort it. The confession is describing the world the way a pastor describes a parishioner who shows up in crisis, not “you are terrible” but “you are broken and you are scared.” That’s a diagnosis that leads to healing, not sentencing.

And both words connect to what the confession has already established. “Broken” reaches back to the Christ section - “binding up the brokenhearted”, the same world Jesus was already healing. “Fearful” reaches back to the sin section and everything we have explored about fear as the root underneath rebellion and hiding. The world is not broken and fearful because it is evil. It is broken and fearful because it has forgotten it is loved. It hid from its Creator. It rebelled out of fear. The diagnosis in this line is entirely consistent with the sin language earlier, and entirely devoid of contempt.

Into that broken and fearful world, the Spirit doesn’t send judgment. The Spirit gives *courage*.

That is striking. We know what the fruit of the Spirit are - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. But this is the *gift* of the Spirit.

And the gift is courage. Which means that one way to discern whether someone is living in step with the Spirit is to ask: are they courageous?

But not just any courage. Here is something I have come to see that I think changes how we read this passage: the fruit of the Spirit are not a separate list from the gift of the Spirit. They describe the *character* of the gift. The courage the Spirit gives is a joyful courage. A kind courage. A self-controlled courage. A peaceful courage. A patient courage. The fruit tells you what kind of courage the Spirit produces. Courage without kindness is cruelty. Courage without self-control is recklessness. Courage without peace is belligerence. The world is full of people who think they are being courageous when they are actually being violent or self-righteous or domineering. The Spirit's courage is different. The fruit is how you know it is genuine.

Now look at what this courage is for. The confession gives us five things, and every one of them requires courage because every one of them threatens something we are clinging to out of fear.

“To pray without ceasing.” This is not a call to walk around muttering prayers all day. It is the courage to remain in constant relationship with God - to keep orienting your life toward the God who has always already loved you, to keep showing up even when God feels distant, to keep submitting yourself even when submission is the last thing you want to do. Praying without ceasing means refusing to hide. And hiding, as the confession told us, is one of the root forms of sin. So the first courageous act the Spirit empowers is the one that most directly counters our deepest instinct when we are afraid: instead of withdrawing, we stay. We keep the conversation open. We keep turning toward God even when, especially when - we would rather turn away.

“To witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior.” The courage to declare that Christ is Lord. In a world of competing allegiances and rival claims to ultimate loyalty, that is a costly sentence to say out loud. It was costly in the first century when saying “Jesus is Lord” meant saying “Caesar is not.” It is costly now when the competing lords are more subtle - nationalism, consumerism, ideology, the quiet assumption that something other than Jesus can give your

life ultimate meaning. Witnessing isn't arguing people into faith. It is living and speaking as if the always-already-loved reality is true, and trusting that the truth does its own work.

"To unmask idolatries in Church and culture." Notice the order: Church first, then culture. The courage to look at your own institution, the community you belong to, the tradition that formed you, and say: this thing you are worshipping is not God. That is the hardest courage of all, because it costs you your own community, and the Spirit works through community. Unmasking idolatry in the church means risking the very thing the Spirit has bound you into. The church can make idols of its own traditions, its own buildings, its own power structures, its own comfort. And yet the confession says the Spirit gives you the courage to name it. The Spirit won't let the church become an idol to itself.

And then culture. The Spirit also gives courage to name the idolatries outside the church - the things our society worships that are not God. The relentless pursuit of wealth as if money could save you. The worship of national identity as if a flag could give you what only God can give. The deification of individual autonomy as if you were not made

to live as one community. The confession doesn't specify which cultural idolatries to unmask, because they shift with every generation. But the courage to name them is constant, and it is the Spirit's gift. The church that only critiques the culture without examining itself is self-righteous. The church that only examines itself without engaging the culture is navel-gazing. The confession demands both - Church *and* culture, because idolatry hides in both places.

"To hear the voices of peoples long silenced." The courage to stop talking and listen. This is not passive. Hearing the silenced requires active work - seeking out voices that have been pushed to the margins, attending to perspectives that have been suppressed, making room at the table for people who were never invited. And it requires courage because it means relinquishing control of the narrative. The people who have held power in the church and in the culture have also held the microphone. Hearing the voices of the silenced means handing it over and being willing to be changed by what you hear. That is frightening. It is also what the Spirit demands.

"And to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace." The courage to do the

public, costly, collaborative work of making the world look more like what God intended. And "with others", not just with other Christians, not just with other believers. Others. The Spirit sends the church into collaboration, not isolation. Justice, freedom, and peace are bigger than the church's capacity to achieve alone. The community that was made in the image of a relational God works alongside anyone who is working toward these things, because the blessing that was meant for all families of the earth cannot be delivered by one family working by itself. This is the covenant logic from the God section bearing fruit in the Spirit section: blessed to be a blessing, and the blessing requires partners.

Every one of these requires courage because every one threatens something we are holding onto out of fear. Prayer threatens our autonomy. Witness threatens our safety. Unmasking idolatry threatens our institutions. Hearing silenced voices threatens our power. Justice work threatens our comfort. And all of it is to be done with the character of the fruit - lovingly, joyfully, peacefully, patiently, kindly, gently, faithfully, with self-control. That's how you know it is the Spirit's courage and not your own agenda.

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!"

"In gratitude." The confession shifts here from what the Spirit gives to how we respond. And the response is gratitude.

This is the fundamental Reformed posture: we receive grace, we respond in gratitude. God is the first actor, and that action is characterized by grace. The only thing we can do is respond. John Calvin said something to the effect that the best we can do is put ourselves in a position to receive the grace of God, and he was right as far as that goes. But I would push him one step further: we also get to respond, and the response is gratitude. So every courageous act the Spirit empowers us for - the praying, the witnessing, the unmasking, the hearing, the working - is done in gratitude. Not in obligation. Not in anxiety about whether we are doing enough. Not in fear that we might lose our standing if we fail. In gratitude. Because we have received something so astonishing - the always-already-love of a God who nurses the helpless

and sprints toward the failures - that gratitude is the only sane response.

And gratitude is what connects grace to faith to action. Grace is God's first move - always. Faith - pistis, trust, is the Spirit's work of aligning us with that grace. And gratitude is what trust produces when it lands. When you discover you have been loved all along, when the Spirit justifies you, realigns you with the truth of your belovedness - what comes out is not obligation but gratitude. It is the exhale after a lifetime of holding your breath. Grace is the reason there is a relationship. Faith is how we orient ourselves within it. Gratitude is what pours out of us when we realize where we have been standing all along.

"Holy and joyful lives." The confession pairs these two words, and the pairing matters more than most readers will notice. Holiness in popular Christianity has become dour, restrictive, joyless, the person who does not drink, does not dance, does not laugh too loud. Holiness as a list of things you don't do. Holiness as the absence of pleasure.

The confession disagrees. Holy *and* joyful. Not holy despite being joyful. Not joyful as a reward for being holy. Holy and joyful together, inseparably, as one description of

the life the Spirit produces. If holiness is not joyful, it is not the holiness the Spirit produces. And if joy isn't holy, if it is just escapism or indulgence or the temporary high of avoiding reality, it is not the joy the Spirit gives.

Joy is the truth. If we are always already loved, if the Spirit has justified and freed us, if God is faithful still, if nothing can separate us from the love of God, then joy isn't an emotion we manufacture. It is the appropriate response to reality. Anything other than joy is a failure to see things as they actually are. That does not mean you are never sad, never grieving, never raging against what is broken. It means that underneath everything - underneath the sorrow and the fear and the brokenness of the world - there's a bedrock reality that is genuinely, irreducibly good news. Joy is what it sounds like when someone finally hears that news and trusts that it is true.

"Even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, 'Come, Lord Jesus!'" The confession ends the Spirit section with eschatological hope, the conviction that what God is doing is not yet finished. "New heaven and new earth" is the language of Revelation, and it isn't an escape plan. John on Patmos

was not writing a literal blueprint for the future. He was writing resistance literature under Roman occupation, using apocalyptic imagery to say that the empire does not get the last word. New heaven and new earth is a promise that what is broken gets remade. The Spirit who gives and renews life is heading somewhere, toward the completion of everything God started. The present-tense verbs that have run through this entire confession are heading toward a future tense that God alone will bring about.

And “Come, Lord Jesus” is one of the oldest prayers of the church - *Maranatha* in Aramaic. The first Christians prayed it under persecution. The last verse of Revelation echoes it. And the confession puts it in our mouths here, at the end of the Spirit section. The final act before the closing affirmation is not a doctrine, not a proposition, not a theological claim. It is a prayer. The community praying together for the completion of what God has always been doing.

We trust that God is working. And at the same time we pray for God to work. “Come, Lord Jesus” holds both at once - confidence in what God has done and longing for what God will do. That is the posture of the church in

the present tense: serving, striving, rejoicing, watching, praying. Always already loved. Not yet finished.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Part Five: We Rejoice

Chapter 12: Nothing Can Separate Us

The confession has done its work. It has moved from belonging through Christ and God and the Spirit, from incarnation to crucifixion to resurrection, from creation to sin to covenant, from justification to courage to eschatological hope. And now it arrives where it has been heading all along.

With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Listen to what just happened. The confession opened with a declaration: "In life and in death we belong to God." It closes with a celebration: nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God. The same merism, life and death, the two poles that encompass everything, appears at the beginning and at the end. But the posture has

changed. The opening was a statement. The closing is a rejoicing.

That shift matters. The confession did not merely repeat its first line in different words. It earned the rejoicing. It walked through everything, the ministry of Jesus, the horror of the cross, the vindication of resurrection, the goodness and brokenness of creation, the rebellion and the "yet," the covenant, the faithfulness, the Spirit's work of justification and freedom and courage, and having walked through all of it, it arrives not at a conclusion but at a celebration. We rejoice. Not "we affirm" or "we confess" or "we acknowledge." We *rejoice*. Joy is the final posture because joy is the appropriate response to what the confession has shown us.

And "nothing." That word is doing the work of Romans 8:38–39, which the confession is echoing directly: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Paul stacked up every conceivable threat, cosmic, political, temporal, spatial, and declared that none of them can break the

bond. The confession compresses Paul's list into a single word: nothing. Not one thing. Not any combination of things. Nothing in the entire range of existence, from life to death and everything between, has the power to separate us from the love of God.

This is always already loved in its most exultant form. Not as a theological framework. Not as a pastoral reassurance. As a shout. As a celebration that has been building for eighty lines and finally breaks through. We are loved, and nothing, *nothing*, can change that.

"With believers in every time and place." The rejoicing is communal, as everything in this confession has been. We don't rejoice alone. We rejoice with the whole church - across every century, every culture, every tradition. The communion of saints. The believers of "every time and place" include the ones who confessed this faith under persecution and the ones who confess it in comfortable pews and the ones who will confess it long after we are gone. The "we" of this confession is not just the people in the room. It is everyone who has ever trusted in this God and everyone who ever will. That is the scope of the rejoicing.

And “believers” appears here one final time. The same pistis reading applies - the trusters, the ones oriented toward this God by the Spirit’s work. But notice that the confession does not end by drawing a boundary. It ends by expanding the circle to its widest possible scope: every time, every place. The final movement is not exclusion. It is inclusion on the grandest scale imaginable.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The confession ends not with a theological statement but with a doxology, a word of praise. And it ends with a shift that the careful reader will notice.

The confession opened with the Trinitarian order of 2 Corinthians 13:13, grace, love, communion, which is Christ, God, Spirit. The existential order. The order of encounter. How we meet God.

It closes with the classical Trinitarian order - Father, Son, Holy Spirit. The doxological order. The order of praise. How we worship God.

The confession began with experience and ends with worship. It began by describing how we encounter the triune God, through grace, through love, through communion, and it ends by naming that God in the language the church has used to offer praise for two thousand years. You start with what you have tasted. You end on your knees.

“Amen” means “let it be so.” It is the congregation’s final word, a collective affirmation that everything the confession has said is true and that the community stands behind it together. It is not a period at the end of a sentence. It is a seal on a promise. Let it be so. Let all of this be true. Let us be the people who live as if we are always already loved, because we are.

That is the Brief Statement of Faith. Eighty lines. Nine words at the beginning: *In life and in death we belong to God.* One word at the end: *Amen.*

And between them, the most astonishing story ever told, a God who made us in love, who entered our condition in Christ, who refuses to let our failure be the final word, who sends the Spirit to justify and free and bind and give

courage, and who is faithful still. A God whose love precedes us, sustains us, and will outlast us. A God from whom nothing - not life, not death, not anything in all creation - can separate us.

You’re always already loved. You have always been loved. You will always be loved.

That isn’t a sentiment. It is the confession of the Christian faith.

Amen. Thanks be to God.

Discussion Guide

These questions are designed for group conversation - Sunday school classes, elder training sessions, midweek small groups, weekend retreats, or any gathering where people want to think together about what the Christian faith confesses and why it matters. They are also usable for personal reflection.

There are more questions here than any single session needs. Choose the ones that fit your group and your time. There are no right answers. There is only the invitation to slow down, pay attention, and see what you find.

Introduction

1. The introduction describes people who have been carrying a God they believe is angry with them. Have you ever carried that God? What did it feel like? What shifted, or what has not yet shifted?

2. “Always already loved” is the theological center of this book. When you hear that phrase, what is your first response - relief, suspicion, hope, resistance? Why?

3. The introduction says this book treats the confession as “art, not legislation.” What difference does it make to read a theological document as art rather than as a set of rules?

Chapter 1: In Life and in Death

1. “In life and in death we belong to God.” The book describes this as a merism - two extremes that include everything between them. What falls between the poles of life and death in your experience right now?

2. The chapter says you can’t lose your belonging to God. You can forget it, neglect it, run from it, but not lose it. Does that comfort you, challenge you, or both? Why?

3. The confession says “we trust” rather than “we believe.” What changes when

you think of faith as trust rather than mental agreement? What becomes easier? What becomes harder?

4. The chapter tells the story of a pastor who died at thirty-six, saying “we belong to God” to his wife and children. What would it take for you to rest your life on those nine words?

Chapter 2: Fully Human, Fully God

1. The chapter says “fully human, fully God” is “not a puzzle to be solved but a truth to be inhabited.” What does it mean to inhabit a truth rather than solve it?

2. If the incarnation is God doing what God has always done, just now visibly, bodily, what does that tell you about God’s character before Bethlehem?

3. The chapter argues that God chose full incarnation not because God had to but because God knew we needed it. What does it mean for your faith that God stooped to meet you where you are?

Chapter 3: Preaching, Healing, Eating, Forgiving

1. The confession describes Jesus's ministry in present-tense verbs: preaching, healing, eating, forgiving. Where do you see those verbs active in your community right now? Where are they missing?

2. The chapter points out that the confession names specific groups, the poor, the captives, the children, the sick, the brokenhearted, the outcasts, rather than collapsing them all into "sinners." Why does that specificity matter?

3. "Eating with outcasts" - not sinners, outcasts. People we cast out. Who are the outcasts in your community? What would it mean for your church to eat with them?

4. The chapter ends by asking whether we will "join the present tense." What would that look like in your daily life this week?

Chapter 4: This Jesus

1. The confession says Jesus was “unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition” - accused by both the religious establishment and the state. When have you seen religious institutions and political powers collaborate in ways that harmed the innocent?

2. The chapter emphasizes the word “this” in “God raised this Jesus.” Why does it matter that we can’t abstract Jesus into an idea we shape to our own preferences?

3. The resurrection is described as God’s counter-verdict - overruling the judgment of the powers. Where do you need God to overrule a verdict in your life or in the world?

4. “Giving his life” - not having it taken. What difference does the active verb make for how you understand the cross?

Chapter 5: Whom Jesus Called Abba, Father

1. “Abba, Father” holds intimacy and authority together. Which aspect of God, the intimate or the authoritative, is easier for you to trust? Which is harder?

2. The chapter says the confession grounds our knowledge of God in Jesus’s prayer life, not in philosophy. How does it change your understanding of God to think of theology as rooted in prayer rather than in argument?

3. The chapter describes the Father language as strategically earning traditional trust that is then spent on the radical equality claim that follows. Have you seen this dynamic, traditional language making room for radical claims, at work elsewhere in the church?

Chapter 6: Created and Makes

1. “God created the world good” is past tense. “God makes everyone equally in God’s image” is present tense. What does it mean for you personally that God is making you in the divine image right now?

2. The chapter describes sovereignty as love that “cannot be coerced, cannot be constrained, cannot be overruled - not even by our rejection of it.” How does this differ from how you have previously understood God’s sovereignty?

3. The confession names rebellion and hiding as two forms of sin. Which one do you recognize more in yourself? What are you afraid of when you rebel or hide?

4. “Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.” The chapter calls “yet” the greatest word in the confession. What “yet” has God spoken into your life?

Chapter 7: God Is Faithful Still

1. The chapter describes the covenant as unilateral - God walked between the pieces alone in Genesis 15. What changes about your relationship with God if the covenant depends entirely on God's faithfulness rather than yours?

2. "Blessed to be a blessing." Election is for service as well as salvation. How is your church community living into its vocation to bless others? Where is it turning the blessing inward?

3. The confession gives two images of God: a mother nursing an infant and a father running toward the prodigal. Which image speaks to you more right now? Why?

4. "God is faithful still." The word "still" appears twice in this passage. What has God been faithful through in your life?

Chapter 8: Everywhere the Giver and Renewer of Life

1. The chapter argues that the Spirit works through community, not through individuals in isolation. How does this challenge the way you think about your spiritual life?

2. The chapter distinguishes between *bios* (biological existence) and *zoe* (flourishing life). Where have you experienced zoe, genuine flourishing, in your life? Was it in community or alone?

3. The chapter includes a personal confession about being a person who withdraws in times of stress. When you are struggling, do you tend to move toward community or away from it? What would it take to move the other direction?

Chapter 9: Set Free

1. The chapter reframes justification from a legal verdict to an alignment. The Spirit bringing us back into contact with the reality that we are loved. How does this reframing change your understanding of what God is doing in your life?

2. “Sets us free to accept ourselves AND to love God and neighbor.” The chapter insists these are simultaneous, not sequential. What happens to your faith if you stop waiting to “get yourself right” before loving others?

3. The chapter is honest about the discomfort of the word “believers.” Does that word create an inside and an outside for you? How might the pistis framework, believers as trusters, change how you hear it?

Chapter 10: The Same Spirit

1. The chapter draws a parallel between the prophets and apostles and Scripture

and proclamation. The Spirit's work continuing through the same means. How does this change how you hear Scripture read or a sermon preached on Sunday morning?

2. "Claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation." The chapter describes the sacraments as the Spirit working through physical, tangible, communal means. Why might God choose to meet us through water and bread and wine rather than through ideas alone?

3. The confession affirms the ordination of women, correcting earlier confessions that did not. What does it mean to belong to a tradition that reforms itself? Does that strengthen your trust in the tradition or make you uneasy?

Chapter 11: Courage in a Broken and Fearful World

1. The confession describes the world as "broken and fearful" - not evil or

terrible. How does that compassionate diagnosis change how you engage with the world's suffering?

2. The chapter describes the fruit of the Spirit as the *character* of the Spirit's gift of courage - joyful courage, kind courage, peaceful courage. How do you tell the difference between the Spirit's courage and human aggression dressed up in theological language?

3. Of the five courageous acts the Spirit empowers, praying, witnessing, unmasking idolatry, hearing the silenced, working for justice, which one is your community most faithful in? Which one is most neglected?

4. "Holy and joyful lives." The chapter says joy is the appropriate response to reality. What keeps you from joy? What would it look like to live as if the good news were actually true?

Chapter 12: Nothing Can Separate Us

1. The confession opens with “In life and in death we belong to God” and closes with “nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God.” What changed between the first line and the last, not in the words, but in you as a reader?

2. The chapter says the confession earns its rejoicing by walking through everything first - incarnation, crucifixion, sin, covenant, the Spirit’s work. Why does the rejoicing mean more after the journey?

3. “Amen” means “let it be so.” As you close this book, what are you saying “let it be so” to? What has this confession shown you that you want to be true, and that you are beginning to trust already is?

For Further Reading

An Annotated Bibliography

This book does not use footnotes or endnotes. What follows is a curated list of the thinkers and works that have shaped both the Brief Statement of Faith and my reading of it. These are not exhaustive scholarly citations. They are recommendations - books and authors I think you would benefit from encountering if something in these chapters made you want to go deeper.

On the Brief Statement of Faith

William C. Placher and David Willis-Watkins, *Belonging to God: A Commentary on A Brief Statement of Faith* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1992). The essential companion to the BSOF. Both authors served on the special committee that drafted the confession. This is the most thorough commentary available, written by people who were in the room when every word was debated.

Jack L. Stotts and Jane Dempsey Douglass, eds., *To Confess the Faith Today* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1990). A collection of essays by members of the drafting committee, exploring the theological questions that shaped the confession. Published while the document was still being reviewed by presbyteries. Stotts and Douglass co-chaired the committee of twenty-one.

Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1991 edition). A readable guide to all the confessions in the Book of Confessions, including a chapter on the process by which the Brief Statement was adopted. Rogers was also involved in the constitutional process.

On the Theologians Referenced in This Book

Karl Barth. Barth's influence on the Brief Statement is pervasive. For an accessible entry point, try *Dogmatics in Outline* (Harper, 1959), a short, readable summary of his theology based on lectures he gave to students in post-war Germany. For the full experience, his *Church Dogmatics* is one of the monumental achievements of twentieth-

century theology, but it is massive. Start with *Dogmatics in Outline* and see if you want more.

Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (Yale University Press, 1952). Tillich's concept of "non-being," referenced in Chapter 1, is explored here in the context of anxiety, courage, and faith. A challenging but rewarding read for anyone interested in how theology engages existential questions.

Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Abingdon Press, 1949). Thurman's foundational work on Jesus as a poor Jew living under Roman occupation. Essential reading for understanding why Jesus's social location matters theologically. A short, powerful book that deserves to be on every Christian's shelf.

Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (Doubleday, 1999). Tutu's concept of ubuntu, "I am because we are", is referenced in Chapter 1. This book applies that communal philosophy to the work of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View" (1960), and Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace* (University

Press of America, 1980). Saiving's essay, one of the founding texts of feminist theology, argues that the traditional definition of sin as pride does not account for women's experience. Plaskow develops this insight in conversation with Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. Both are referenced in Chapter 6's discussion of rebellion and hiding as two forms of sin.

C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (various editions). The description of Aslan as "not safe, but good" is from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and is referenced in Chapter 6's discussion of sovereignty.

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (various editions). Calvin's thought pervades the Reformed tradition and this confession. The *Institutes* is the systematic treatment. For a more accessible entry, try Randall Zachman's *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian* (Baker Academic, 2006).

On the "Always Already" Framework

Douglas Ottati, *A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Eerdmans, 2020). Ottati uses "always already" language in his own

constructive theology. A significant contemporary Reformed voice.

Ken Wilber, *The Essential Ken Wilber* (Shambhala, 1998). Wilber's integral philosophy, which draws on Heidegger among others, uses "always already" to describe awareness as a present reality rather than an achievement. My earliest encounter with the phrase likely came through his work, though my theological application is my own.

On Presbyterian Polity and Confessions

The Book of Confessions, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The first half of the PCUSA constitution, containing all eleven creeds, confessions, and catechisms. Available as a free download from pcusa.org. If you want to explore the confessional tradition this book draws on, start here.

The Book of Order, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The second half of the constitution, containing the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, the Form of Government, the Directory for Worship, and the Rules of Discipline. The "great themes of the Reformed tradition" and "election to service

as well as salvation" referenced in Chapter 7 are found in the Foundations.