

# LIVING FAITH: A STATEMENT OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF

The Presbyterian Church in Canada

## INTRODUCTION

### 1) Why a Statement of Faith?

- The bible is a collection of writings over 1000 years organized and edited by communities of faith beginning with Israel and concluding with the Christian Church. These writings include an over-arching story, many individual stories, poetry, law, teaching, parables, sayings and so on. A statement of faith is intended to be a brief organizing summary of what the bible teaches, or more exactly, the essential, core, important beliefs of the bible from a Christian (New Testament) point of view.
- Situations change and life changes, old things pass, and new things come to be. Psalm 137: 1-4 offers us a great example of how the people of Israel are being challenged to 'sing the Lord's song' in a new situation where they are exiled, far from home. They will have to discover and creatively write a 'new song', one that has roots in the old song and therefore continuity, but also a song that addresses the new situation they are living.
- The first Statement of Faith was remarkably simple and appears in the New Testament: "Jesus is Lord." It was a statement that identified a Christian's true Lord over against the claim of the emperor Caesar to be sole and defining Lord of all inhabitants of the empire. This statement also establishes that all truth and all God we know as Christians comes through Christ in his revelation and journey through death to life. As things changed for Christians and new questions arose, statements of faith became longer and more involved.

### 2) What is a Statement of Faith?

- The original word for a Statement of Faith is "Creed" from the Latin '*credo*', meaning 'I believe.' A Creed is a series of 'I believe' statements. The best-known creed and one of the earliest is the Apostles' Creed ("I believe in God the Father Almighty..."). A 'Confession' is a longer statement of faith and can be multiple pages. The other word is 'Catechism', which means: instruction. Catechisms often accompanied confessions of faith and are organized as question-and-answer statements to help explain confessional statements. Most Presbyterians who grew up a generation or two ago will know at least one question and answer from the Westminster Catechism which accompanies the Westminster Confession of faith of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. "What is the chief end of man?" Answer: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever."
- Some of the early creeds of the church include the Apostles' Creed (2<sup>nd</sup> century) and the Nicene Creed (4<sup>th</sup> century). These are accepted by all Christians everywhere. Later, at the time of the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, creeds, confessions and catechisms were written by various Protestant churches

in various countries in Europe and North America. In the last century this has included South America, Asia, Africa, and most every part of the world.

### 3) Presbyterian Statements of Faith since the 16<sup>th</sup> Century

- There are many such statements. The most important ones for us as Presbyterians are The Scots Confession, The Heidelberg Catechism, The Westminster Confession of Faith, the larger and shorter Catechisms.
- In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, there are the Barmen Declaration of Faith, and the Declaration of Faith concerning Church and Nation. In 1967, the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A, came out with its own more contemporary Confession of Faith. All of these statements have influenced Living Faith in some way.

### 4) The Presbyterian Church in Canada and our 'Subordinate Standards.'

- For us as Presbyterians in Canada, the bible as the written word of God, testifying to Jesus Christ the living Word, and under the continuing illumination and correction of the Holy Spirit, is the highest standard of truth we hold. But after that, we have what are called 'Subordinate Standards,' (subordinate to the bible).
- Our subordinate standards are: 1) The Westminster Confession of Faith of the 17<sup>th</sup> century with its accompanying catechisms, 2) The Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation of 1954, and 3) Living Faith of 1984.
- 1) The Westminster Confession is our oldest confession and our most dated one. At the time, religion and the state were connected very intimately, and every state had to establish its religion, often doing battle with other states or internally with other groups to establish it. Even though the Westminster Confession was first composed by a gathering of clergy in England, it was only established by an act of Parliament in Scotland. We wouldn't hold some of the ideas in the Confession today, and subsequent generations have rejected some of them such as: its anti-Catholicism (calling the pope the anti-Christ), its rigid predestinarianism (God controls all that happens, even the fate of all people to heaven or hell) and its acceptance of the state's role within the church. But its singular allegiance to the sovereignty of God, its rejection of idolatry, its devotion to Christ and to the continuing reformation of the church through the Holy Spirit, the resurrection of the dead, and so on, continue to shape the faith of Presbyterians today.
- 2) Rather than give up the Westminster Confession of Faith as Presbyterian Churches in other parts of the world have done, the Presbyterian Church in Canada has decided to keep it as a subordinate standard and to make corrections as different generations evolve and change in their faith. To that end, an important second subordinate standard is the Declaration of Faith concerning Church and Nation of 1954. Following World War 2, and with the imperialistic aggression of dictators and tyrants like Hitler and Stalin, it was felt that the Westminster Confession did not declare clearly enough that the state

must not interfere in the church and that the church is called to resist the state when it acts unjustly. And so, the Declaration focuses on the role of the church and the state, establishing a healthy independence of the church from the state but also a public responsibility to call the state to account on behalf of the justice of God.

## 5) An Introduction to Living Faith

- Our third and most recent subordinate standard is Living Faith. It was felt that we needed to express our faith in more contemporary terms, as Canadians, with a document that could be used liturgically in worship as much as being a study tool for learning and discussing our beliefs.
- Unlike previous statements of faith, Living Faith addresses the themes of doubt and human suffering, sex, war, the economy, family, and justice. It also raises the question of the relationship of Christians to people of other faiths or no faith.
- On pp. 30ff, there is an index with biblical references to the faith statements, and on pp. 36ff, there is an index with various earlier documents and statements of faith that have influenced different sections of Living Faith.
- Faith is something very personal to every person of every culture, generation and life experience. But are there certain common beliefs we hold as Christians or should hold if we call ourselves Christians? We will explore such questions in our discussion over the next 6 weeks or so.

## CHAPTER ONE: GOD

1.1 There is one God, not many gods. This is a basic Christian conviction. While Islam and Judaism also believe in one God, Hinduism believes in many gods as do some other faiths, while Buddhism believes in no god at all. Today, to believe even in God is a statement, especially in a skeptical society like Canada where faith in God is something many people don't have. They are indifferent to God or antagonistic to the idea of God.

God is to be 'known' and 'served'. Through such knowledge comes 'eternal life' and through such service comes 'joy' and 'peace'. Does this mean something to you?

God's first act is to create, and so God is creator and maker of all that is. The world we live in and take in with all our senses speaks to us not of chaos or mere accident, but purpose and order. It speaks of God who created it and creates in it.

1.2 'God has come to us.' Here, Christianity diverges from Judaism and Islam. We Christians claim God has come to us in three ways – as the One who called a people Israel and established a personal relationship with them, as One who in Jesus Christ has come to save and make whole through a relationship of faith, and as One who continues to come as Holy Spirit, ever present in the world as guide and inspiration.

How does God come to you?

1.3 The church... what is the church's purpose? The first purpose according to Living Faith is to uphold and defend the truth given to the apostles (the first spiritual leaders of the church), a truth given us through the story and teaching recorded in the scriptures and experienced as a revelation from God. But do the Old and New Testaments 'witness to God's mighty acts'? What are they? Do they 'reveal the Creator's holy love'? What is it? Do they 'lead us to Jesus Christ'? How?

1.4 The creeds of the early church.... Do they really 'preserve the faith of the apostles who first preached the Gospel of Christ'? Or are they more an expression of what the church came to believe at the time, an expression that may not be as expressive for us today? Are our creeds a legacy in which 'the true interpretation of the Scriptures is protected'? Or are they a legacy which we treasure, but which do not take away our own responsibility to interpret the scriptures faithfully for our own time and place today?

1.5 God is 'Trinity', three in one and one in three. Does this make sense to you? God is father, son and Holy Spirit. There is total equality which means no one person is greater than the other. But they are also different: the Father **to** whom we come, the Son **through** whom we come, and the Spirit **by** whom we come. Are such distinctions meaningful to you? What other distinctions would you make?

1.6 We worship God, the source of all life. God's attributes are: almighty, wisdom, power, faithfulness, and love. Which attributes mean something to you, and which do not?