

“What Do We Confess?”
Jeremiah 5:23-29; Ephesians 3:5-13;
John 8:31-38

June 24, 2018
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When I decided to a sermon series about the Confessions, I wasn't quite sure exactly what that would mean. Indeed, I have found it a challenge. The last couple of Sundays we did the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. Then a few hundred years go by, and we have another confession in another time.

It was the mid-1500s. I'm not a great historian, but I looked back and the 1500s were full of change. It was a time of exploration. All of a sudden Europe found out there was this other place across the ocean. They called it the New World, in spite of the people there who didn't see it that way.

This great time of exploration was not only an exploration that was geographic, but it was an exploration in thought processes as well. It was a time when people like Copernicus published his treatise noting that the earth wasn't the center of the solar system, but that the sun was. Galileo was born and began to speak about what was going on. Francis Bacon, who is sometimes called the Father of Scientific Method, lived in the 1500s. There was all this change and beginnings of new ways of thinking.

Martin Luther had posted his Theses in 1517, and there was a struggle to understand and reform the church and the nature of it. There was a great belief in human rationality. One statement I saw said something like, “God gave us the ability of human reason so we should be able to understand fully the world and all spiritual things.” I think some of us might want to step back from that now, recognizing that perhaps it reflects some human hubris.

This is the environment in which they lived. When people made a decision, when they found something new, when they discovered it, they felt like it was real and they needed to completely give their lives to it. And gave their lives for their beliefs.

John Knox was born in Scotland in 1513 and trained as a clergyperson in the church. When Knox was a young clergyman, a man named George Wishart came to the town where Knox worked. Wishart was preaching this new thing: the Reformation—a reformed way of seeing the world. Knox recognized that in Scotland at that time the Catholic Church had come under control of the King. The King had been simply putting his illegitimate children and his friends into the high places in the church. Around this time, the scripture was just starting to be promulgated in the common vernacular and people were just beginning to hear it.

The story was that Wishart was coming through and he was preaching up a storm. As he was going across Scotland preaching, just behind him were coming Cardinal Beaton's men trying to catch him. Knox heard Wishart speak and was transfixed and transformed by what he said. He wanted to go with Wishart, but Wishart said, “No, I

don't want to cut your life short. I'm not sure how much longer I have." At least one story said that after he left, five hours later they caught him and shortly after that he was burned for heresy.

It was a rough time. There was death for what one believed. There was a lot of uncertainty. And there was a lot of poverty. It was a time when there were those who were wealthy and rich and powerful, but there were a lot of people who weren't. It was in this time that John Knox discovered the freedom in Christ.

We read that passage from Jesus saying, "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free." Knox felt that freedom in Christ and in the new way of being a church. So he went with the reformers to St. Andrews and was the chaplain for the people who had taken over the place. The French came in and finally the castle at St. Andrews fell. Knox was captured and spent the next year on a galley slave ship as a galley slave. After that, when he was freed, he went to Geneva and spent time with John Calvin. In that time he found a freedom of being with people in the church and worshiping God. Eventually he went back to Scotland to attempt to change what was happening there.

It's often just painted in terms of Protestant and Catholic, but I think we need to think more in terms of religious power versus religious faith and experience. Knox wanted again to change the nature of his homeland. At one point he had a chance to try to do that in a particular way. They had pushed the French out. They had gotten some breathing room (for about 3 years) and had a Parliament. They voted to have a confession, and that's how the Scots Confession came about. Knox and a couple others put together a confession in about 4 to 5 days. It has the fervor of the reformation in it, of this new way of understanding.

There are three pieces that are central to this confession, having to do with the life of faith. The first of these is right preaching. I think what he was suggesting—and he already knew that he was a powerful preacher himself—is that we need to hear the Word. We need to be in touch with the Word itself, not just somebody else's understanding of it.

In his time, not many people could read so preaching was a way of speaking the Word and expounding on it directly, rather than just following some church doctrine or some confession that was written years and years ago. Knox wanted to do right preaching. He wanted to have people hear the Word and get engaged in it. So that was one thing.

Second was his desire for the right use of sacraments. He only wanted sacraments that came directly out of scripture. The only two he could find in scripture were communion and baptism. Those had been with the church through the centuries. They were coming directly from the Word that he was hearing from God and engaging the congregation with. Listening to God and engaging the local folks was about right relationship—right relationship with God and right relationship with one another.

So he wanted us to hear the Word, to be in right relationship with God through sacraments, and third, he wanted ecclesiastical discipline. That's an elegant way of saying he wanted church discipline. He wanted accountability within the body. When he says he wants accountability, he wants that discipline because he wants to repress vice and nourish virtue. I don't see that as a bad thing, to repress vice and nourish virtue.

The Scots Confession says a lot about what we believe and how we believe in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and the nature of scripture and of the church so that we can have these three things. Part of the reason he wanted to clarify beliefs is because he had seen the corruption in the church. He had seen how all the money was going to a few.

He also wrote something called "The Rule of Discipline." In it, he suggested:

1. Local church clergy need to be paid a living wage so we can actually have a worshipping community in the local community and so that all the money isn't going to the hierarchy.
2. There should be parish schools so that people can begin to learn to read, and read scripture. There should be universities so they can continue their learning.
3. All the money the church has should be used not to support the people who are living lavishly, but to help the impoverished, to help the poor.

So he recognized a different nature of a church—how it was to be a church for the people. Perhaps it was because he spent time in Geneva and had that experience of a church giving him life and freedom, that's what he thought of when he thought of the church. He said, "The church is a place of life and felicity." That can be life and joy, or life and a place where you can be able to talk about what's really going on with you.

It's interesting to me that he recognizes that the church is not a particular church. He really suggests it's not even a denomination. He says the church is invisible. We can't really define its edges because the church is made up of saints. The church is made up of the faithful. The church is the place where people do want to hold each other accountable so that they can not do what is wrong, but nourish what is good and do what is right.

If you read through the confession, you might find it a little strident at times. He's got the fervor of a convert to reformation understanding, a new faith position, and in that fervor he recognizes that he needs to speak up. The church not only is a place of the faithful that is living and joyful, but, as the Ephesians passage suggests, through the church the rich wisdom of God can be given to the rulers and authorities "in the heavenly places" (as it is translated). I looked at that I and I think it can be translated in a different way: that the authorities and the rulers "can be made to fit with heaven."

One of the things Knox recognized was that, yes, we need governance. He's got a section about how we should pay attention to it. But there is also a piece that suggests

that the rulers have a responsibility to heaven. I ran across a picture of him arguing with Mary Queen of Scots. Knox recognizes that the church has wisdom to bring to the rulers and authorities. Whether he did the exact right thing in that relationship is a little up in the air. But he recognized the need to bring the goodness of God, the grace of God, into the governance itself. We have separation of church and state, and there are some good reasons for that. They didn't. He recognized the direct responsibility.

The question he gives us impetus to ask is this: Does the church continue to have responsibility to the rulers and authorities to bring about the common good? I think we started our church with one who said yes, we do have an obligation to speak what is good, to recognize what is vice, and to nourish what is virtue.

Knox recognizes the main body and place for that is in the churches as followers of Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. That's the elect. That's a hard word for us these days, but for him it meant those who had received grace, the chosen.

I think God has chosen us all to receive grace; it's just that we haven't chosen to receive it. It's the recognition that the church is a special place because of that. It's a place where we can continue to try to choose grace, choose to be God's people. To be a place of life and joy, even in the midst of struggle and hardship. To be a place that speaks what is good in the midst of what is evil. To be a place that recognizes God's will rather than human will. To be a place that embraces all people with the grace of God. Amen.