

I Believe: The Second Helvetic Confession

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Texts: Deuteronomy 7:6-9, Hebrews 10:19-26

My ministry field advisor has a flair for the dramatic and loves church history. So every October, the church's youth group donned their best renaissance outfits, cooked up some brats and pretzels, and transformed the Great Hall into a Reformation Fair.

There was a printing press where you could print your own copy of your favorite bible verse to take home. There were quill pens and parchment for trying out your best letter of dissent. You could make a set of prayer beads. You could even, for the cost of a donation to the youth group, receive a piece of paper with the history of indulgences. And there was, of course, a door on which you were invited to nail your own faith statement, or thesis, written on a post-it note.

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther marched up to the cathedral in Wittenburg, Germany and nailed 95 theses, his faith statement, to the door. He was hoping to start a conversation, but instead started The Reformation. Now he wasn't the only one concerned about the direction the Catholic church was going. At the same time, Ulrich Zwingli, a pastor in Zurich, had begun advocating for reform in Switzerland. They would be joined in short order by some very familiar people in our Presbyterian world, namely John Calvin in Geneva and John Knox in Scotland.

Now, while united in the conviction that the church needed to be reformed, Luther and Zwingli were divided over the specifics. And while they could readily agree that the Bible, not the church, was the highest authority and that grace alone assures salvation...well actually, they agreed on 14 of 15 main theological points, but they irrevocably disagreed on the nature of the Lord's Supper, leaving the Reformed and Lutheran churches with major differences in theology to this day. It should be noted that they did both agree that they disagreed with the theology of John Calvin, who had still another understanding of the nature of Christ's presence in communion.

This debate grew so contentious that, in 1559, after a Eucharist service in Heidelberg devolved into two priests battling over the chalice while the congregation watched in horror, the local elector, Frederick, knew something had to be done. From this came the Heidelberg Catechism. But because it did not agree with the Peace of Augsburg, Frederick was in hot water.

He turned to Henrich Bullinger, the pastor of the high church in Zurich. Now Bullinger had been part of the team that wrote the First Helvetic Confession, a document written in 1536 to unite the theology of the Swiss Reformed churches. But he knew that this document would not be the answer to Frederick's predicament.

Bullinger, who had advised and pastored three generations of Reformers, was foremost a preacher and pastor. He was concerned by the division within the Protestant churches and the violence that surrounded it. He was also highly practical and pastoral, concerned with every day matters of faithful living. And he had written a thirty-chapter personal statement of faith that he

planned to have attached to his will. It was his attempt to relate the theology to the everyday life of the congregation. He took a chance and sent this document to Frederick, which is how a highly personal statement of faith became an influential confessional document for many branches of the Reformed faith, including our own.

The Second Helvetic Confession spends a lot of time on the concept of church, practically laying out the responsibilities of the church, its work, its liturgy, and its leadership.

The church, Bullinger says, is “an assembly of the faithful called or gathered out of the world.”¹ It’s a fellowship, a community, whose membership doesn’t depend on any earthly distinction. What gives us membership in the church is that God has chosen us to be God’s own people. We can’t even know who is the church and who isn’t. Furthermore, the church has existed from the beginning of time. And the covenant with the first humans, which created community between people and between people and God is continued through the ones made with Noah and Moses and David. The new covenant in Jesus is part of the old covenant, extending our understanding at all are and have been part of the church of which Christ is, was, and will be head. We are all fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

Now, this does not mean that we are all exactly the same. In a diversity of times and places and in the diversity of people gathered into the big family of God, we will do things differently. We will see things differently. We are different people. But, the confession tells us, this is a blessing, because with diversity comes a richness of gifts and ways to serve. And it also gives us the ability to learn from one another and deepen our faith as we wonder together about God.

We won’t always agree. Since the very beginning, the church has struggled to agree on how this faith thing actually works. As Bullinger points out, “there have at all times been great contentions in the Church, and the most excellent teachers of the church have differed amongst themselves about important matters,”² citing Peter and Paul among others, and still the church has persevered, he says. Indeed, as we struggle with these disagreements faithfully and always with the rule of love, remembering that we are one because Christ makes us one, we come to understand truth and justice more clearly.

The thing about the church is that we are a diverse community, not brought together because of shared experiences or talents or interests. You might be sitting next to somebody right now that you would never have had opportunity to connect with. Maybe your paths would never have crossed and your worldview would never have been influenced by theirs. But we’re here because of God who we gather to worship. Because of Jesus who binds us together into one body, the church, to go out together and follow his way of love.

Here we get to practice beloved community, to learn from each other, to care with radical hospitality for those who are different from us, to serve alongside each other, to share in the tasks of ministry and governance, and to support each other. Consider how being a part of this fellowship, just a small portion of the church, has expanded your understanding of how God acts in love for this world. The ways you have changed and grown because of those you’ve served

¹ BOC, SH 5.125

² BOC, SH 5.133

alongside in the church. The things you have learned about faith in a diverse community that has made your faith stronger and your love louder.

The author of Hebrews says we dare to approach God, to come right up to God, because Christ made us worthy. Christ is the one who holds this together and makes right the places where we fail. What a message of grace!

But it doesn't end there. It's not all about us. Or, rather, it is about us, all of us together. Holding fast to our trust in this, we are called to go out to be community builders in the world, to be Christ in the world. We won't always get it right. But knowing who we are in Christ gives us the courage to keep trying. To return, in community, to the scriptures over and over again to receive guidance.

The Second Helvetic Confession declares that being the church is active. We are not given, it says, "a fictitious, empty, lazy, and dead faith, but a living, quickening faith"³... "humans were not created or regenerated through faith in order to be idle, but rather that without ceasing they should do those things which are good and useful."⁴

Because of the gift of grace, we act in faithfulness. We should feed the hungry. Care for the sick. Educate our children in the faith. Visit the lonely. Protect the afflicted. Challenge injustice. Build community. Worship together.

The author of Hebrews tells us that church has to come together for worship and to provoke each other for love and good deeds. That word, provoke, in Greek, literally means to irritate each other in such a way that one has to respond.

That's what church is. We come to find food for our souls, sure. But we also come to be spurred into action to love extravagantly the way that the scriptures tell us Jesus did and does. It might make us uncomfortable, take us out of our comfort zone, but we come to be transformed by our worship in community, so that our actions in this world, not just in this community, but in the world, preach the gospel.

Bullinger wanted the church to adhere to the good and faithful doctrines, but he wanted the doctrines always to lead to good and faithful living. In a time when tensions were high and everyone was quick to defend their religious position, he wanted the church to seek unity in their diversity. He wanted them to pay to the Word of God...to the love of Jesus. To pay more attention to the places where, as he wrote, "the wicked gain ground and do harm to the Church" as the pious "judge [rashly]...exclude, reject, and cut off those who the Lord does not want to have excluded or rejected."⁵

The thing about the church is that we are a unified body, bound together by God for ministry outside these walls. Everyone you meet meets the church in you. Everywhere you go, you are the

³ BOC, SH 5.111

⁴ BOC, SH 5.118

⁵ BOC, SH 5.140

church in that place. You're living your faith as you break open the kingdom for others in this world. Our faith is not a dry set of doctrines in a book, but a living daily practice in the world.

In a world where so many are done with the church, so many struggle to see good news in our worship and service, minding the practical advice of Bullinger, who calls us to worship well, but also worship in the world in our living, couldn't hurt. Remembering to open doors wider, to love expansively, to focus on the gospel of Christ, which is love and grace, and set aside our need to judge and be right, might actually make the church more visible to a world that needs it.

So as we go, friends, remember who you are, whose you are, and for whose purposes you are. We are God's beloved, we are the living church, we are love-sharers and light-bearers. May it be so. Amen.