

REFORMATION SUNDAY: OCTOBER 27

# One Christ, Many Confessions: Reformed Theology from Geneva to Belhar

Three hundred years ago, William Dunlop, a professor of church history at the University of Edinburgh, published two volumes of confessions that had enjoyed “public authority” in Scotland since the Reformation. While the Westminster Standards (1647-48) filled the first volume, more than ten earlier confessional documents—including the Geneva Catechism (1542), the Scots Confession (1560), and the Heidelberg Catechism (1563)—filled the second. By placing Westminster in the broader tradition of Reformed (“Calvinist”) theology, Dunlop honored a distinctly Reformed custom: he compiled a book of confessions.

The Reformation produced many catechisms and confessions. Reformed churches did not try to formulate one universal creed. They held to an earlier tradition that each faith community—be it in Zurich, Geneva, or Edinburgh—should draft a statement unique to its time and place. Communities declared their solidarity with each other, not by adopting the same words, but by affirming that they heard in different words the same witness to Christ.

Reformed theologians believed that a kind reader could hear the voice of Christ speaking in each confession, and that this would provide the unity that any one confession lacked. And they allowed that the need for new confessions would not end, as the Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934), the Confession of 1967, and the Confession of Belhar (1986)—adopted by the PC(USA) General Assembly in 2016—richly demonstrate.

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