

Has the PCUSA abandoned a faithful confession of Jesus as Lord?

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This question was [raised](#) on June 12, 2007, when the Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly's Office of Theology and Worship issued a five-page document, *The Church's One Foundation Is Jesus Christ Her Lord*. The document, with its attendant question (along with five other such questions), is offered as a direct response to the New Wineskins Association of Churches raising "significant questions about the faith and mission of the church that every Presbyterian should take seriously;" so seriously, in fact, that the cover letter introducing the document to Executive Presbyters and Stated Clerks comments:

"We recognize that most of our congregations are not focused on New Wineskins or the statements being made about the Presbyterian Church (USA). We are simply making this resource available for those who seek to interpret accurately the positions of our church. Please feel free to distribute it as you deem helpful."

The *Church's One Foundation* contains a summary page followed by four pages of extended comments. In regard to the question at hand, the summary page answers, "No." It then sets out a brief statement, in support of this negative response, which points to a prior product of the Office of Theology and Worship, *Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ*. In the more extended commentary that follows, it goes on to herald *Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ* for "clearly proclaiming the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the Reformed understanding of salvation" "in unmistakable declarations."

Background

Beaver-Butler Presbytery sent an Overture asking the 213th General Assembly, 2001:

"to affirm that among the essential tenets of the Reformed faith is the affirmation that Jesus Christ, as he is proclaimed in Holy Scripture, is the only Savior of humanity and the world."

The Assembly responded with the following statement:

"The General Assembly offers its thanksgiving for the concerns raised by the Presbyteries of Beaver-Butler, San Diego, and San Joaquin regarding faith in Jesus Christ, to whom all power in heaven and earth has been given. We recognize a widespread concern for recovering the place of our confessions in all aspects of church life. The General Assembly answers Overtures 01-43, 01-51, and 01-52 by requesting the Office of Theology and Worship to prepare and widely publicize a list of available materials for study and worship that will help our congregations better understand the theological richness of the Lordship of Jesus Christ in *The Book of Confessions*, *Book of Order*, and the Scriptures; the imperfections in our daily responses to God's calling; and ways in which congregational and individual witness can be strengthened.

"As a witness to what we believe, we affirm the following statement: We confess the unique authority of Jesus Christ as Lord. Every other authority is finally subject to Christ.

"Jesus Christ is also uniquely Savior. 'It is his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and final return that restores creation, providing salvation for all those whom God has chosen to redeem.'"

Based on the above referral, the Office of Theology and Worship prepared the 243-line, seven-page document titled, *Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ*. This document was resoundingly approved by the 214th General Assembly, 2002, by a vote of 497/11 with 5 abstentions.

Key Section

The key section in which *Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ* speaks to the original overture put forward by Beaver-

Butler Presbytery is lines 148-176. This is attested by the fact that *The Church's One Foundation* incorporates a direct quote of lines 155-168. The remaining portions of this key section, lines 148-154 and 169-176, are excerpts taken from the Second Helvetic Confession. The first (lines 148-154) is drawn from Chapter XI: OF JESUS CHRIST, TRUE GOD AND MAN, THE ONLY SAVIOR OF THE WORLD, paragraph: *Jesus Christ Is the Only Savior of the World, and the True and Awaited Messiah*; while the second (lines 169-176) is taken from Chapter I: OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURE BEING THE TRUE WORD OF GOD, paragraph: *Inward Illumination Does Not Eliminate External Preaching* (C-5.006-.007).

The choice of this second excerpt for use in affirming that "Jesus Christ is the only Lord and Savior" (*Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ*, line 155) seems to invite confusion between the concept of God's ability to inwardly illuminate a sinner's heart to the saving power of Jesus Christ, apart from ever hearing the external preaching of this same good news, and the issue of whether one must receive and believe that good news of forgiving mercy and redeeming grace in Christ Jesus alone in order to come to salvation. It appears an especially puzzling choice when placed in juxtaposition against the prior passage cited from Chapter XI - a passage that never wavers in a direct march to this clear and unequivocal conclusion: "For however many seek salvation in any other than in Christ alone, have fallen from the grace of God and have rendered Christ null and void for themselves (Galatians 5:4)."

Has the PCUSA abandoned a clear and unequivocal confession of Jesus Christ as Savior?

Admittedly, this is a different question than that posed by the Office of Theology and Worship. However, it is a no less important question; a question that is naturally raised when the product of that office introduces a contextual confusion between the concepts of illumination and salvation. What is more, the simple observation that the two plain, pointed lines of the original Beaver-Butler overture ballooned to the 243 lines proffered in response by the Office of Theology and Worship also begs this same question.

Below, the key section of *Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ* is presented alongside *Jesus Christ Is the Only Savior of the World* from the Second Helvetic Confession. Read and judge for yourself: Has the PCUSA abandoned a clear and unequivocal confession of Jesus Christ as Savior?

Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ, lines 148-176:

For we teach and believe that this Jesus Christ our Lord is the unique and eternal Savior of the human race, and thus of the whole world, in whom by faith are saved all who before the law, under the law, and under the gospel were saved, and however many will be saved at the end of the world [The Second Helvetic Confession, 5.077].

Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord, and all people everywhere are called to place their faith, hope, and love in him. No one is saved by virtue of inherent goodness or admirable living, for "by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" [Ephesians 2:8]. No one is saved apart from God's gracious redemption in Jesus Christ. Yet we do not presume to limit the sovereign freedom of "God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" [1 Timothy 2:4]. Thus, we neither restrict the grace of God to those who profess explicit faith in Christ nor assume that all people are saved regardless of faith. Grace, love, and communion belong to God, and are not ours to determine.

Paul, after a beautiful development of his thought, in Rom. 10:17 at length comes to the conclusion, "So faith comes from hearing the Word of God by the preaching of Christ." At the same time we recognize that God can illuminate whom and when he will, even without the external ministry, for that is his power [The Second Helvetic Confession, 5.006, 007].

Second Helvetic Confession, Chapter XI, paragraph: *Jesus Christ Is the Only Savior of the World*, C-5.077:

For we teach and believe that this Jesus Christ our Lord is the unique and eternal Savior of the human race, and thus of the whole world, in whom by faith are saved all who before the law, under the law, and under the gospel were saved, and however many will be saved at the end of the world. For the Lord himself says in the Gospel: "He who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. . . . I am the door of the sheep" (John 10:1, 7). And also in another place in the same Gospel he says "Abraham saw my day and was glad" (ch. 8:56). The apostle Peter also says: "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." We therefore believe that we will be saved through the Lord Jesus Christ, as our fathers were (Acts 4:12, 10:43, 15:11). For Paul also says: "All our fathers ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:3f). And thus we read that John says: "Christ was the Lamb which was slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8), and John the Baptist testified that Christ is that "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Wherefore, we quite openly profess and preach that Jesus Christ is the sole Redeemer and Savior of the world, the King and High Priest, the true and awaited Messiah, that holy and blessed one whom all the types of the law and predictions of the prophets prefigured and promised; and that God appointed him beforehand and sent him to us, so that we are not now to look for any other. Now there only remains for all of us to give all glory to Christ, believe in him, rest in him alone, despising and rejecting all other aids in life. For however many seek salvation in any other than in Christ alone, have fallen from the grace of God and have rendered Christ null and void for themselves (Galatians 5:4).