

THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST:
THE THEOLOGY OF THE CHURCHES ON THE THRESHOLD OF UNION

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Both the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church felt compelled in their short histories to produce consensus theological statements.

The Theological Commission of the Congregational Christian Churches began work on a Statement of Faith in 1940. After study and discussion throughout the denomination, the General Council in 1946 referred it to the churches. As with the Commission Creed of 1883, the Council did not consider itself to have the authority to “adopt” a creed, only to “recommend” it to the churches. The *Statement* was already being used for instruction of adults in *Our Christian Faith* by Walter Marshall Horton.

In 1954 the President of the Evangelical and Reformed Church described a need for “a reasonably adequate and authentic description of Evangelical and Reformed thinking on Christian doctrine.” He urged, “not a rigidly authoritarian official statement of doctrine, but a presentation of the consensus of Christian thought prevailing among us.”¹ The Theological Committee began work on this project in 1956. Written by Elmer J. F. Arndt, from the Eden faculty, and thoroughly reviewed by the committee, this statement was published in 1960 as *The Faith We Proclaim*. Its subtitle read, “The Doctrinal Viewpoint Generally Prevailing in the Evangelical and Reformed Church.”

These two consensus statements, of different formats and lengths, revealed the common theological trends affecting both denominations. Both documents showed the heavy imprint of neo-orthodoxy. Both began with a strong statement of God’s transcendence, God’s initiative in the divine-human relationship, God’s intervention in history, and the reality and seriousness of sin. There were other similarities. Both affirmed their church’s commitment to Christian unity. Both affirmed Bushnell’s insight that the truth of God lies beyond the ability of our words to express. Both reflected the Mercersburg concern that the church is not just an “invisible” abstraction but a *visible* reality. While the E&R document affirmed that church’s roots in pietism, “a concern for a vital personal relation to God in Christ,” the CC statement repeatedly called for “commitment.” Both statements considered the church’s mission to the world as essential to its nature.

The two statements addressed traditional theological subjects but found different ways to

¹Elmer J. F. Arndt, *The Faith We Proclaim* (Philadelphia: Christian Education Press, 1960), vii, viii.

express them. Arndt said the Trinity, “expresses both the unity of God and the richness of the being of the one God.” The CC statement with a simple formula described God as “(1) a transcendent God who (2) enters into history and (3) enters into our hearts.” Both documents struggled with the mission of Christ and the Atonement. Arndt, after describing different theories, concluded, “No one theory has been able to include all that faithful people have received.” The CC statement reflected Bushnell’s views, “In Christ the very center of God’s character, his heart of love, was revealed and began to evoke appropriate response in human hearts.”

Both statements approached with caution the “kingdom of God” idea that had been so important to the post-millennial missionary movement and the social gospel. Arndt cautioned, “Jesus summons men to *receive* the Kingdom rather than to build it or to merit it.” The CC statement said, “Whether evil is ever to be **completely** overcome, at some later period in history, we cannot be sure. It seems improbable.” This statement did make other references to “God’s Kingdom” and both statements affirmed the presence of the Realm of God in the present, wherever people respond to God’s love and accept God’s rule.

The two statements chose to address different subjects. *The Faith We Proclaim* addressed traditional theological topics, beginning with an affirmation of the Bible, “the supreme standard of [the Church’s] faith and life.” It made explicit the centrality of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which were only implied in the CC statement. Arndt repeated the *Heidelberg Catechism*’s emphasis on gratitude as the motive for Christian behavior, but made only brief mention of a concern for social justice. The CC statement organized the Christian response to God under two aspects, facing to God and facing to the world. Under each aspect it described three responses: Faith, fellowship and freedom. The CC *Statement* affirmed artistic and scientific creativity, advocated for world order above the sovereignty of the state, and the importance of family and educational and benevolent institutions. It declared the work of the church to call all people “to devote themselves, after the manner of Christ, to the common good of mankind.” The *Statement* also expressed an openness to persons of other faiths: “Congregational Christians would say of them that when their lives fundamentally witness to the living God of love who is in Jesus Christ, they are essentially if not formally Christian.”

These two communities, shaped by similar experiences and theological trends, were moving in the direction of a common consensus. Both groups were products of the Reformation, Pietism, Romanticism, Liberal Protestantism and Neo-orthodoxy. The last named movement had significantly shaped the current theology. The Evangelical and Reformed Church continued to speak in more traditional Biblical and theological language; the Congregational Christians persisted in a strong commitment to the world. But the areas of consensus were preponderant.