

The Doctrine of the Church – A Declaration of Faith

Adopted by PCUS in 1977 as a “contemporary statement of faith”

Chapter Seven - the Christian Church

(1) The church is founded on Jesus Christ.

Gathered around the Word and sacraments,
those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior,
together with their children,
have formed a corporate, visible body
in pilgrimage with God across the centuries.

The church has sought to order its life and ministry
in obedience to the teaching of the first apostles.

It has attempted to carry out Christ's commission
in various institutional forms and structures
that demonstrate both continuity and change.

We acknowledge that Christ chooses to be known in the world
through this community of ordinary people,
therefore we dare not despise or abandon the church.

Christ is the head of the church,
therefore we are responsible to Christ
when we make policy and decisions in the church.

Christ is the foundation of the church,
therefore it will not fall despite our weakness.

We are confident that the Lord of the church
will judge and defeat our sinful intentions and actions,
help us in our weakness and blindness,
and use the church to accomplish his purposes.

(2) The church is marked by the Holy Spirit.

Across the centuries since the church was founded,
the Spirit has formed and identified it.

We recognize the true church of Jesus Christ
wherever the work of the Spirit is evident:
in preaching and sacraments,
in the new life and continuous growth of believers,
in the sharing of spiritual gifts and material things,
in mission and service to the world.

The boundaries of the church are not clearly known to us,
but God knows those who are his.

(3) The Christian church arose within Israel.

The followers of Jesus
remained at first within the people of Israel.
As persons from all nations joined them,
they were separated from the Jewish community.
Yet they continued to accept Israel's story as their own
and to consider themselves part of the people of God.

We can never lay exclusive claim to being God's people,
as though we had replaced those
to whom the covenant, the law, and the promises belong.
We affirm that God has not rejected his people the Jews.
The Lord does not take back his promises.

We Christians have often rejected Jews throughout our history
with shameful prejudice and cruelty.

God calls us to dialogue and cooperation
that do not ignore our real disagreements,
yet proceed in mutual respect and love.

We are bound together with them in the single story
of those chosen to serve and proclaim the living God.

(4) The church encounters other faiths.

The church has often lived and worked

among those who do not share the Christian faith.

It has been sometimes corrupted and sometimes helped
by other religions, and by secular faiths and ideologies.

In turn it has affected them for good or ill.

We do not fully comprehend God's way with other faiths.

We need to listen to them with openness and respect,
testing their words to us by God's word.

We should be loving and unafraid in our dealings with them.

We know God calls us to share the gift of Christ
with all who will receive it.

We are confident God judges all faiths, including our own.

(5) The church exists within political communities.

Throughout its history the church has struggled

to be faithful to God in political situations:

under persecution,

or as an established arm of the state,

or in separation from it.

God rules over both political and religious institutions.

We must confuse neither with the kingdom of God.

We must not equate the Christian faith
with any nation's way of life

or with opposition to the ideologies of other nations.

We hold Christians are to be law-abiding citizens

unless the state commands them to disobey God,

or claims authority that belongs only to God.

We must not allow governments

to impose Christian faith by legislation,

nor should we demand undue advantages for the church.

The church must be free to speak to civil authorities,

neither claiming expert knowledge it does not have,

nor remaining silent when God's Word is clear.

(6) The church has its ongoing story with God.

The church's story with God did not end

with the latest events recorded in Scripture.

Across the centuries the company of believers

has continued its pilgrimage with the Lord of history.

It is a record of faith and faithlessness, glory and shame.

The church has been persecuted by hostile societies,

but it has also known times of privilege and power

when it joined forces with dominant cultures.

It has sought holiness

through separation from society,

as well as through involvement in the world's affairs.

It has experienced life-giving reformations.

It has known missionary expansion throughout the world,
but also periods of dwindling resources and influence.

It has divided into rival orders, sects and denominations,
but it has also labored for cooperation and union.

We confess we are heirs of this whole story.

We are charged to remember our past,
to be warned and encouraged by it,
but not to live it again.

Now is the time of our testing

as God's story with the church moves forward through us.

We are called to live now as God's servants
in the service of people everywhere.