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Reformed Confessions
of the 16th and 17th Centuries in
English Translation: Volume 2, 1552–1566

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Compiled with Introductions by
James T. Dennison, Jr.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Permissions	ix
Abbreviations	xi
34. The Forty-Two Articles of the Church of England (1552/53) . .	1
35. Anglican Catechism (1553)	13
36. Emden Examination of Faith (1553)	43
37. The Frankfort Confession (1554)	53
38. The Emden Catechism (1554)	54
39. The Confession of Piotrków (1555)	76
40. Confession of the English Congregation at Geneva (1556)	95
41. Waldensian Confession of Turin (1556)	103
42. Confession of the Italian Church of Geneva (1558)	111
43. Guanabara Confession (1558)	117
44. Geneva Students' Confession (1559)	125
45. Confession of Marosvásárhley/Vásárhelyi (1559)	132
46. The French Confession (1559)	140
47. Confession of Pińczow (1559)	155
48. Lattanzio Ragnoni's <i>Formulario</i> (1559)	161
49. The Confession of Faith in the Geneva Bible (1560)	181
50. The Scottish Confession (1560)	186
51. The Waldensian Confession (1560)	207
52. The Prussian-Vilnian Discussion (1560)	230
53. Theodore Beza's Confession (1560)	236
54. The Confession of the Spanish Congregation of London (1560/61)	370
55. Waldensian Confession (1561)	402
56. Theodore Beza's Confession at Poissy (1561)	407
57. The Belgic Confession (1561)	424
58. The Hungarian <i>Confessio Catholica</i> (1562)	450

59. The Confession of Tarcál (1562) and Torda (1563)	651
60. The Thirty-nine Articles (1562/63)	753
61. The Heidelberg Catechism (1563)	769
62. The Synod of Enyedi (1564)	800
63. The Second Helvetic Confession (1566)	809
64. The Antwerp Confession (1566).....	882
65. The Netherlands Confession (1566)	886
66. The Synod of Gönc (1566)	895
67. Synod of Torda (1566)	899
68. The Synods of Gyulafehérvár and of Marosvásárhely (1566)....	904

Geneva Students' Confession (1559)

On his return from exile in Strasbourg (1541), Calvin (1509–1564) submitted his Ecclesiastical Ordinances to the Council of Geneva. One of his dreams was an academy for training children. The Collège de La Rive was available for his plans, but the magistrates exercised control over it. Even though the Ecclesiastical Ordinances transferred control of the Collège to the Venerable Company of Pastors, the school struggled. The city would not bear the costs of attracting capable teachers (and several choices ended in debacle, i.e., Sebastian Castellio [1515–1563]). Furthermore, the magistrates maneuvered to reassert their control of the institution by sponsoring private tutors in the city. The Rive building languished in a state of disrepair along with Calvin's dream for a stable educational environment.

But with his political triumph over the Libertines in 1555, plans advanced for an Academy, integrated with the other schools of the region. A site was selected outside the wall for the Academy and construction on the new facility began in the fall of 1558. Providential also was the dismissal of several prominent ministers/teachers from Berne in 1559, due to their refusal to cede the power of excommunication to the city magistrates. Calvin invited these exiles to Geneva and the Council installed one of them, Theodore Beza (1519–1605), as Rector of the new Academy. Beza delivered the inaugural address to the Academy at Saint Pierre on June 5, 1559. Approximately 160 students were enrolled on that occasion.

With the Venerable Company of Pastors still in control of education, the Collège de La Rive now became the *schola privata* (students to age sixteen) and the Academy became the *schola publica* (advanced academic training). Students could matriculate at the latter after completing the

curriculum of the former. The Academy was not considered a full-fledged university—it provided courses only in law, medicine, and theology.

The confession printed below is the statement required of the students for admission to the Academy. The parallel French and Latin originals are found in the *Corpus Reformatorum* 37:721–30. Our translation is based on the Latin text of that edition. The Latin text is also printed in Busch 2/1:89–95. An abbreviated version is found in *The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin* (ed. by P. E. Hughes, 1966), 345–46.



CONFESSION OF THE STUDENTS AT GENEVA, 1559

Formula of the confession of faith to which all students of the public school have to bind themselves in the presence of the rector.

I testify that I wish to embrace and retain the doctrine of the faith as it is understood in the catechism of this church, and to subject myself to the established discipline in this church; nor will I adhere or assent to any of the sects through which the peace and harmony, which God through His Word has established here, is disturbed.

And so that this matter may be even more expressly signified, and that the possibility for all additional subterfuge may be precluded, I confess that there is one God, in whom it is necessary for us to acquiesce, that we must worship and adore Him; and in that one, we must place all of our hope. And although He is one simple essence, He is nevertheless distinct in three persons. From this it is evident that I should detest all of the heresies condemned by the first council at Nicaea, the council at Ephesus, and the council at Chalcedon, together with all of the errors renewed by Servetus and his followers. For I acknowledge that in this simplicity, in the one essence of God, there is the Father who has begotten His Word from eternity, and that the Holy Spirit has always existed in it; and that each of these persons possesses His own peculiar personality in such a way that the deity always remains whole.

Likewise I confess that God created not only this visible world, i.e., the heaven and earth and whatever is contained in them, but also invisible spirits, some of whom have persisted in obedience to God, others through their own malice have fallen headlong into destruction. And I understand that those

who have persevered owe it to the free election of God, who thoroughly guided them to love, and by His goodness to hold fast, that by this kindness to them they remained firm and constant. And, therefore, I execrate the error of the Manichaeans, who have imagined that the devil is evil by nature and that from his origin and beginning he operates on his own.

I confess that God created the world once in such a way that He is its perpetual governor, to the point that nothing is able to happen or occur without His counsel and providence. And although Satan and the reprobate plot the confusion of all things, and even the faithful pervert right order by their sins, nevertheless I acknowledge that God, as supreme power and ruler of all, converts bad things into good: in the end, He directs all things as if by certain secret reins, and governs all things in some wonderful manner. This we ought to adore with all the submission of our heart, since we are not able to embrace it with our mind.

I confess that men were created in the image of God, i.e., endowed with full uprightness of spirit, of will, and of every part of the soul, faculty, and sense. Moreover, that all of our corruption and the vices which we commit thereafter have come forth because Adam, the common father of all men, by his own rebellion alienated himself from God. Having abandoned the source of life and of all good things, he caused himself to be the poisonous source of all miseries. In whom it happens that each one of us is born infected with original sin; and from the very womb of his mother is cursed and condemned by God, not only because of the sin of another, but because of the wickedness which is also in us at that time, although it is not apparent.

I confess that comprehended in original sin is the blindness of the mind and perversity of the heart with the result that we are fully stripped and destitute with respect to those things which pertain to eternal life, with the result that in us even all natural gifts themselves are depraved and contaminated. Through this it happens that no thought may in any way move us to do good. And so I detest those who attribute to us a measure of free will by which we might prepare ourselves for receiving the grace of God, or such that from ourselves, we might cooperate with the power that is given to us by the Holy Spirit.

I confess that Jesus Christ was given to us by the infinite goodness of God. By this remedy, we should be called back from death unto life, and should recover whatever perished in us in Adam. And in like manner (I

confess) that He who is the eternal wisdom of God the Father and of one essence with Him, took on our flesh so that He may become God and man in one person. Therefore, I detest all heresies contrary to this principle: for example, of Marcion, Manes, Nestorius, Eutyches, and the like, together with the madness which Servetus and Schwenkfeld wanted to revive.

Because it pertains to the matter of obtaining salvation, I confess that Jesus Christ by His death and resurrection most thoroughly completed whatever was required for taking away our offenses, that He might reconcile us to God the Father; and that He overcame death and Satan, that we may partake of the fruit of His victory; and lastly that He received the Holy Spirit without measure, that from Him He may bestow to each of His in measure that which He pleases.

Therefore, I confess that all of our righteousness, through which we are pleasing to God and in which it is necessary for us to wholly rest, was established for the remission of sins which He acquired for us, by cleansing us by His blood and through that one sacrifice, by which He pacified the wrath of God kindled against us. And I affirm that they are proud and should not be tolerated, who attribute to themselves a little merit in which resides a little bit of the hope of salvation.

Moreover also I acknowledge that Jesus Christ not only justifies us, with all of our offenses and sins having been covered, but also by His Spirit sanctifies us. Also, these two (namely, obtaining free remission of sin and being conformed to a holy life) are not able to be torn apart and separated from each other. Nevertheless, since until we depart from this world many defilements and many vices always remain within us (through this it happens that whatever good works we produce through the power of the Holy Spirit are infected with some defect); therefore, we must continually flee to that free righteousness emanating from the obedience which Jesus Christ furnished in our name, since we have been received in His name and God does not impute our sins to us.

I confess that we become sharers of Jesus Christ and of all His benefits through the faith which we have in the gospel, since evidently we truly and certainly have been persuaded that the promises comprehended in Him pertain to us. Moreover, since it influences our whole being, I, therefore, acknowledge that faith occurs in us in no other manner than through the Spirit of God, and that it is a special gift which is given only to the elect, whom surely God predestined freely unto the inheritance of salvation before

the foundation of the world, not because of any dispositions of merit or of any other virtue.

I confess that we are justified through faith; that through it we apprehend Jesus Christ, given as the mediator for us by the Father, and rely upon the promises of the gospel in which God testifies that we possess from Him what pertains to being righteous and pure from all stain, since our sins have been wiped away by the blood of His Son. And so I detest the madness of those who try to persuade us that the essential righteousness of God is in us, and for whom the free imputation [of Christ's righteousness], in which the Scripture orders us to rest, is not enough.

I confess that faith opens for us access to the blessing of God, to whom also we ought to pray with confident trust that He will hear us, just as He promises us. And that such honor owed to Him alone is the primary sacrifice through which we declare that we render to Him all things received. Moreover, although we who stand before His majesty are clearly unworthy, nevertheless if we have Jesus Christ for a mediator and advocate, nothing more is required from us. Through this it happens that I will abominate the superstition, which some have contrived, of going to male and female saints, as if they would be patrons for us with God.

I confess then that the universal rule for living well and also that the instruction of the faith is completely handed down in Holy Scripture, from which it is evil to add or subtract anything. Therefore, I detest whatever men have contrived to obtrude for articles of faith and to bind consciences by their laws and statutes. Therefore, I likewise add that I repudiate whatever has been introduced for the worship of God without the authority of the Word of God, and all papist ceremonies of this kind. Finally I detest that tyrannical yoke by which wretched consciences are oppressed, such as the law of auricular confession, of celibacy, and other things of that nature.

I confess that it is necessary that the church be governed by pastors to whom is entrusted the gift of the preaching of the Word of God and of the administering of the sacraments. Neither is it allowable for anyone to usurp this gift through their own will without a legitimate election, so that confusion may be avoided. For, if those who were called to this task do not show themselves to be faithful enough for enduring in it, they should be deposed. Moreover, all authority has been placed in it [i.e., the gift of the pastorate] so that from the Word of God they may rule the people committed to them in such a way that Jesus Christ always remains the

supreme pastor and only Lord of His church; and the voice of that One should be listened to. Therefore, I execrate that papal hierarchy, as they call it, as a diabolical confusion, and moreover established with the result that God Himself is despised and the Christian religion is exposed to mockery and reproaches.

I confess that our weakness requires that sacraments be added to the preaching of the Word, as signs by which the promises of God are sealed in our hearts; and that two sacraments of this kind were ordained by Christ, namely, baptism and the Lord's Supper; and that the first indeed (was ordained) so that it may open access for us into the church of God, and the other that it may hold us in it. Truly, I repudiate those five sacraments which were contrived by the papists and first originated in their minds.

Moreover, although the sacraments are (given) to us for a pledge (*arrabon*), through which we are reassured of the promises of God, nevertheless I acknowledge that they will be useless to us unless the Holy Spirit should render them efficacious in us, as instruments, so that our confidence, intent on created things, is not severed from God. Yes, indeed, I confess that sacraments are depraved and perverted which are not drawn back to this goal—that we seek in Christ whatever is required for our salvation—and as often as they are changed for a use other than that whereby we fix all of our faith fully on Him. Furthermore, since the promise of adoption is held out even to the posterity of the faithful, I acknowledge that it is necessary for the infants of believers to be received into the church through baptism; and on this issue I detest the ravings of the Anabaptists.

As it pertains to the Lord's Supper, I confess that it is a testimony of our union with Christ: because not only did He die once and rise for us, but also He truly feeds and nourishes us by His body and blood, that we may be one with Him and that His life may be shared with us. For although in the meantime He is in the heavens until He should come to judge the world, nevertheless I believe that He, strengthened by the hidden and incomprehensible power of His Spirit, vivifies our souls by the substance of His body and blood.

Moreover, in general I confess that in the Supper and in baptism, God truly and efficaciously gives whatever is figured by them, but that for a perception of such benefit it is required that we join the word with the signs. In this matter, I detest the abuse and perversion of the papists

(who removed from the sacraments that which was particular, namely the doctrine which teaches us the true use and fruit emanating from them) and changed them into magical deceits.

Likewise I confess that the water, although it is a frail element, nevertheless in baptism truly testifies to us of the true blood of Jesus Christ and of the presence of His Spirit. Also that in the Lord's Supper the bread and wine are for us true and not false pledges, that we are nourished spiritually by the body and blood of Christ. And thus I conjoin with the signs, the possession and fruit of that which is offered to us there.

Likewise, since the holy Supper, as it was instituted by Christ, is for us a holy treasure of infinite value, I detest as an intolerable sacrilege that abomination of the Mass, worthy of execration; because what Christ left for us is now turned into profit by that which is called a sacrifice for the living and the dead, and also now by all the rest of the things which diametrically oppose the purity of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

I confess that God wills that the world be ruled by laws and governments so that the reins are not absent by which the actions of unruly men are restrained. And for this reason, He has established kingdoms, principalities, dominions, and whatever else pertains to civil jurisdiction. Of these things He wants to be regarded as author, so that because of Him not only is their rule obeyed, but we even revere and honor them as vicars of God and ministers established by Him, so that they may exercise a legitimate and holy office. Therefore, I also acknowledge that it is just that we obey their laws and statutes, pay tributes and taxes and other things of that nature; and finally that we should willingly and gladly bear the yoke of subjection, nevertheless with this qualification: as long as their rule remains honest and unblemished before God the supreme Ruler.

(Translated by Francis X. Gumerlock)