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REFORMATION CONFESSIONS: THEIR RELEVANCE IN OUR POSTMODERN WORLD

Johan D. Tangelder

When someone became a Christian in the early church, great emphasis was placed on the importance of his or her baptism. During the period of Lent (the period from Ash Wednesday to Easter), those who had recently come to the faith were given instruction in Christian beliefs. Finally, when they had mastered the basics of the faith, they would recite the Creed together, as a corporate witness to their faith—which they now understood. Faith had been reinforced with understanding. They would then be baptized with great ceremony on Easter Day itself, as the church celebrated the resurrection of its Lord and Savior. In this way the significance of the baptism of the believer could be fully appreciated; he or she had passed from death to life (Romans 6:3-10). Baptism was a public demonstration of the believer's dying to the world and being born to new life in Jesus Christ.

ALISTER E. MCGRATH, *I BELIEVE: UNDERSTANDING
THE APOSTLES' CREED*

Do evangelicals still have an authoritative message to offer to the world? If they have one, what is it?

I believe that these questions are appropriate as the evangelical theological scene presents such a confusing picture. On the one hand, some evangelicals emphasize that all theological discourse is relative, or *contextual*, in nature. They claim that every theological system reflects the particular cultural framework in which it was originally written. Mark W. Karlberg observes that "according to these contextualists, the church's comprehension of the Word of God is merely a fallible, human approximation of divine truth."¹ Consequently, they are either dismissive or even disdainful of the formulation of doctrinal statements. They stress their *provisional, nonbinding* character, claiming that they are the product of human effort, not to be confused with the changeless truth that is in the mind of God and beyond our reach.

On the other hand, other evangelicals understand that without a confession of faith they are in a doctrinal wasteland. Recent developments indicate that many are returning to the idea of a rule of faith and to forms of ecclesiastical authority for the same reason as the early church did; they are responding to what they perceive as a threat to their faith. The *Lausanne Covenant*, agreed upon by International Congress on World Evangelization at Lausanne, Switzerland, which met in 1974, is an important statement

of faith within evangelicalism and should be among confessional literature. In May, 1977, a gathering of forty-five evangelicals issued *The Chicago Call: An Appeal to Evangelicals*, urging evangelicals to return to their Christian heritage, to affirm the great ecumenical creeds and the Reformation confessions, and to witness boldly to its faith before the world. They declared: "We deplore two opposite excesses: a creedal church that merely recites a faith inherited from the past, and a creedless church that languishes in doctrinal vacuum. We confess that as evangelicals we are not immune from these defects."²

DEFINING CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS

How do we differentiate between creeds and confessions? The word *creed* comes from *credo* (I believe), since the declaration of faith involves not merely acceptance of truth, but a personal commitment. *Credo* means that believers hold certain things to be true, and act as though truth matters, even at the price of martyrdom. The personal nature of the creeds is clearly demonstrated in the first article of the *Apostles' Creed*: "I believe in God. . . ." A creed, then, is a concise, formal summary of the main points of the Christian faith. As such, the term "creed" refers most frequently to the ancient creeds of the early church: the expressions of essential biblical truths, which Christians in all places and times have recognized in the *Apostles' Creed*, the *Nicene Creed*, the *Definitions of Chalcedon*, and the *Athanasian Creed*. It is never applied to denominational statements of faith. Confessions (*confessus*, assent, declaration), symbols (*symbolon*, a token, a sign), articles of faith (*articulus fidei*, something believed), as they are variously termed, express the specific beliefs of a denomination. Examples would be the *Belgic Confession* or the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. They are also often called "doctrinal standards" to which denominations officially commit them-

selves. What are the marks of a true confession of faith? L. Praamsma remarked, "A true confession should express the common living faith of the church, the communion of the saints, and therefore be accepted spontaneously."³

OBJECTIONS TO CONFESSIONS

Evangelicals who strive to uphold doctrinal standards are confronted with many objections. I can only point to a few common ones.

Individualism. Rampant individualism has afflicted North American evangelicalism. Starting with the priority of the individual, people are told that they must find "the church of their choice that best fits their needs." Seeker services have to meet the aspirations of potential "religion shoppers." Not God's choice, but individual preference constitutes then the gathering of the church. This consumer mentality has become one of the major heresies of our century. A subtle distinction is now made between saying the church is Christ's body apart from which a Christian cannot live and saying that a Christian should find a church meeting his needs.

But the Word of God does not address individuals but the people of God. The Word of God is the source of the knowledge of God. It sets the standards for the Christian faith. None of the great creeds and confessions was produced independently of what the church said and thought.

A confession is not based on the sole insights of an individual; it is a corporate effort. We form the church and are led by her. We confess our faith. We are a company of believers. We are "a people belonging to God" (1 Peter 2:9). Jesus reminds us of our life together. He taught us to pray "Our Father . . . Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). The church is a gathering of believers which has received the truth of God and builds on it (1 Timothy 3:15).

She has the right and the authority for formulating her confession. Although the emphasis is on the body of the believers (1 Corinthians 12), the personal responsibility is not forgotten. As a member of the church, her confession is my confession. The historic confessions are an antidote against individualism. Rediscovering the corporate and historic nature of the Christian faith reduces the danger of entire communities of faith being led astray by charismatic lone rangers. Charles Hodge said that the "unblessed ambition of restless individuals" had made schism a major problem of his day.⁴

Bible Alone. Some independent groups disparage confessions entirely. They claim that the formulation of binding confessions contradicts the self-sufficiency of Scripture and destroys Christian liberty. Mark Noll notes that Americans in the early nineteenth century transformed an earlier battle cry of the Reformation, "the Bible alone," into a distinctly American appeal—"No creed but the Bible!"⁶ Revivalist Charles Finney (1792-1875), in rejecting the creeds of the Presbyterian church, said:

I found myself utterly unable to accept doctrine on the ground of authority. . . . I had nowhere to go but directly to the Bible, and to the philosophy or workings of my own mind. I gradually formed a view of my own . . . which appeared to me unequivocally taught in the Bible.⁷

To say "no creed but the Bible" is successful only so long as there is a common agreement about what the Bible teaches. But in world full of lies, the church cannot do without confessions. Without a doctrinal standard a church will become prey to all kinds of heresy. The confessions do not compete with the Bible for our loyalty. The Bible is God's Word to us; the creeds and confessions are our answer to God. In the late nineteenth century Edward

Hiscox rightly pointed out that while all evangelical Christians hold that the Bible alone is the complete sufficient guide in matters of faith and religious practice, yet all denominations prepared forms of doctrinal statements, setting forth more or less fully, the fundamental truths which they understand the Scriptures to teach.⁸

Jesus Alone. Often when confessions are discussed, the cries of well-intentioned believers tell us that we should preach only Jesus. We "just" need him alone. But we cannot preach Jesus without arriving at increasing clarity of God's great plan of redemption. And some evangelical theologians argue that a minimalistic credo of "Jesus is Lord" is fully sufficient for the church in a postmodern, postdogmatic era. But this position, however, would permit full fellowship with Marcion, Arius, and Pelagius, to name only three notable heretics.⁹ It is emptying the Christian faith of its historic and orthodox content. Instead of "Jesus alone" or "Jesus is Lord" we should recognize the faithful witness of the historic creeds to the one triune God—in particular the *Nicene Creed*.

Deeds and not Creeds. For decades liberalism or modernism has had as its slogan: "Deeds, not creeds." It promotes unity through concrete deeds rather than through a confession. It speaks of a life of discipleship rather than assent to any confessional standard, right conduct rather than right teaching. But one's confession does not exclude action. It is never a matter of mere assent. It commits all of life. It is normative for one's daily life. Confessions are not abstract declarations. They are closely related to daily life. There is no separation between orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Theodore Plantinga points out that separation between doctrine and life, or between "orthodoxy" and "orthopraxis," is foreign to the Bible and genuine spirituality.¹⁰ Believers act upon their confession. "The confession of faith," says John H. Leith, "is a living sacrifice when the believer

offers by the help of words his whole personality to his Creator."¹¹

LESSONS FROM HISTORY

Christians need historical awareness. We must have a conversation with the past to prevent infatuation with theological fads and fashions. It is sheer hubris to regard our times as the center of all spiritual activity and to consider what has gone on in the churches throughout the centuries as irrelevant. Spiritual and theological renewal cannot bypass the great historic landmarks of the church. We do well to reflect upon what our spiritual forebears bequeathed at the cost of blood, sweat, and tears. Alister McGrath argues that "there is a need to recover and value the hard-won insights of earlier generations and incorporate them into our thinking."¹² We cannot read Scripture as if it has never been read before. J. I. Packer, taking up an image often used in the past, noted that "tradition allows us to stand on the shoulders of many giants who have thought about Scripture before us."¹³ The church preserves the bond which unites her with the faithful of previous generations. She has a rich heritage of spiritual goods which we in turn can transmit to our children.

Confessions, as the life of the Christian church as a whole, bear the marks of the history. They express continuity with the historic teachings of the church, and are ongoing responses to the Word of God. The deposit of faith, a pattern of sound teaching, is reflected in the creeds of the early church and in the confessions of the Reformation. The Reformation was a systematic attempt to return to the vision of the New Testament and the early church fathers. For the Reformers, the past possessed a capacity to illuminate and interpret the present. "No one who has read extensively in Luther and Calvin," observed Richard Lovelace, "can doubt that apart from later Puritan authors like John

Owen and Jonathan Edwards, they are unmatched in spiritual depth, intellectual vigor, and biblical fidelity. Evangelical ministerial training ought to include a wide use of Reformation authors along with their modern counterparts."¹⁴

THE SCRIPTURE AND THE CONFESSIONS

Evangelicals often express the fear that confessional Christians consider creeds and confessions as authoritative as the Scriptures. I suggest that they should lay their fears to rest. The Reformation doctrine of *sola scriptura* insists that the only infallible, ultimate authority is the Scripture. It utterly rejects the claim that creeds and confessions are of equal authority with the Scriptures. Scripture is the norm that singularly defines doctrine. Reformed confessions are concerted but not exhaustive expositions of Scripture. They are faithful and consistent expressions of biblical truth. Consequently, the confessions are not next to the Scripture and not above it, but deep under it. Confessional authority is limited by and derived from the authority of Scripture, which alone remains ultimately and permanently authoritative. In repeating what the Lord says in Scripture, the church can err. Therefore, the confessions can be corrected by the Word and reformulated. Scripture is not subject to change, the confessions are always subject to examination and revision. The latter are not inspired by the Holy Spirit, but are the products of human endeavor, limited by man's finiteness and sinfulness. Scripture alone is the final court of appeal. Bruce Demarest rightly points out that creeds (confessions) should never be regarded as a *norma normans*—"a rule that rules." They should be viewed as a *norma normata*—"a rule that is ruled."¹⁵ Historically, the Reformation has always recognized this principle. For example, the *Basel Confession of 1534* declares:

Finally we desire to submit this our confession to the judgment of the divine Biblical Scriptures. And should we be informed from the same Holy Scriptures of a better one, we have thereby expressed our readiness to be willing at any time to obey God and His holy Word with great thanksgiving.¹⁶

The *Lutheran Formula of Concord* (1577) states;

We believe, teach, and confess that there is only one rule and norm according to which all teachings (*dogmata*) and teachers are to be appraised and judged, which is none other than the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and the New Testaments.¹⁷

The *Westminster Confession* (1646) has also a detailed statement on the Word of God.¹⁸ Changes are sometimes made in the confessions as some issues are clarified in the struggle for soundness of doctrine. Reformed churches are always reforming churches. They listen carefully to any objections brought against the confessions on the basis of the Word of God. However, they refuse to lower themselves to the level of either debating societies or philosophical organizations. Reformed churches have always demanded obedience to the confessions because what has been revealed in God's Word is repeated in the confessions. Anyone who no longer recognizes the authority of the confessions can do so only if a sound biblical reason can be shown. The fundamental truths in confessions can never be changed. A church may not deny the Trinity, the incarnation, the Atonement wrought by Christ, and his Resurrection and Ascension. But there may be differences about eschatology. Great care must be taken before any changes are made. A confession is not a club rule which can be revised at every whim and wish. We may not simply overrule the testimony of the past.

THE REASON FOR CONFESSIONS

Why do we need confessions? Historically the confessions have been formulated and valued for the following reasons:

Heresy. From the very outset the church has been confronted by approaches to biblical interpretation which were heretical and even hostile to the Bible. In every age the church must expose and guard against destructive false teachings. She takes a position over against the world, over against false churches, over against heretical movements. She has the right and the authority to formulate the truth of God in her confessions and use them as a test of orthodoxy. In our age infiltrated by relativism and a misconstrued view of tolerance, the church must state clearly that if there is no heresy, it follows logically that there is no true doctrine. The creeds and the confessions identify the enemy and declare their opposition against it. The primary aim of the *Nicene Creed* was to overcome the Arian heresy. The Reformers were confronted with the sacramentalism and hierarchalism of the Roman Catholic Church and corruption of doctrines. Martin Luther argued forcefully that "it is the duty of every Christian to espouse the cause of the faith, to understand and defend it, and to denounce every error."¹⁹ The *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) contains a clear exposition of the biblical view of the Lord's Supper over against the Roman Catholic Mass. The *Canons of Dort* (1618-19) were formulated to settle a serious controversy in the Dutch Reformed church initiated by the rise of Arminianism. The *Book of Common Prayer* pleads: "From all false doctrine, heresy, and action, Good Lord, deliver us."²⁰

Unity. Creeds and confessions are not divisive. They serve rather as a rallying point for those who are in one accord. They enable Christians to understand each other. The introduction to *Summary of the Confession of Faith of the Students of the Academy of Geneva* (1559) states:

We reject and detest all heresies contrary to the pure faith which until now we have held and wish to follow to the end, we have agreed on the following declaration of faith concerning the unique and simple essence of God and the distinction of the three persons.²¹

The unity within a denomination can best be described as a *confessional* unity. For example, Reformed churches explicitly adopted their confessional writings as forms of unity. Yet to say that churches are confessionally united does not mean that all their members hold the same opinions, but that they must have made a joint commitment. If doctrinal division appears, they must seek to overcome it. The confessions provide unity and a common allegiance that encourage purposeful diversity. Their use does not assail or infringe anyone's liberty, but only protects our own.

Propagation of the Gospel. In the confessions the church does not turn inward but outward, to the world. Because the church is the pillar and ground of the truth, she is commissioned to proclaim the truth, to confess her faith in the presence of many witnesses (1 Timothy 6:12). Throughout the centuries the confessional standards have become instruments used by God in the maintenance and propagation of the truth. "An evangelical church," defined J. Gresham Machen, "is composed of a number of persons who have come to agreement in a certain message about Christ who desire to unite in the propagation of that message, as it is set forth in their creed on the basis of the Bible."²²

Teaching. The confessions have a didactic function. They encourage clarity of belief and are used to teach the youth of the church the core doctrines of the Christian faith. For centuries the catechism's question-and-answer method of instruction has been widely used. Augustine rec-

ognized its importance. The Protestant Reformation was especially given to catechetical instruction.

CONCLUSION

Much more could be said about the role of the confessions in the church. I did not touch upon the binding authority of creeds, church discipline, nor on the possibility of developing new creeds. In brief, I have attempted to show that the confessions lead us back to the Scriptures, aid us in our fight against the heresies of our time, strengthen us in our faith, and embolden us in our witness to the world.

Author

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Notes

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20. *The Orthodox Evangelicals*, 81.
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THE NICENE CREED (325 A. D.)

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God. Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets.

And we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. And we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.