

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE CHURCH AND CONFSSIONAL STEWARDSHIP

One of the great Presbyterian theologians of the 19th Century was W.G.T. Shedd. Among his many valuable writings was *Calvinism Pure & Mixed: A Defense of the Westminster Standards*. In responding to the often heard motto, “No creed but the Bible” Shedd wrote, “Of course Scripture is the only infallible rule of faith. But this particular way of appealing to Scripture is specious and fallacious. In the first place, it assumes that Calvinism is not Scriptural, an assumption which the Presbyterian Church has never granted. . . . Secondly, this kind of appeal to Scripture is only an appeal to Scripture as the reviser understands it. Scripture properly means the interpretation of Scripture; that is, the contents of Scripture as reached by human investigation and exegesis. Creeds, like commentaries, are Scripture studied and explained, and not the mere abstract and unexplained book as it lies on the counter of the Bible House. The infallible Word of God is expounded by the fallible mind of man, and hence the variety of expositions embodied in the denominational creeds. But every interpreter claims to have understood the Scriptures correctly, and, consequently, claims that his creed is Scriptural, and if so, that it is the infallible truth of God. The Arminian appeals to the Articles of Wesley as the rule of faith, because he believes them to be the true explanation of the inspired Bible. . . . The Calvinist appeals to the creeds of Heidelberg, Dort, and Westminster as the rule of faith, because he regards them as the accurate exegesis of the revealed Word of God. By the Bible these parties, as well as all others who appeal to the Bible, mean their understanding of the Bible. There is no such thing as that abstract Scripture to which the revisionist of whom we are speaking appeals; that is, Scripture apart from any and all interpretation of it. When, therefore, the advocate of revision demands that the Westminster Confession be conformed to Scripture, he means conformation to Scripture as he and those like him read and explain it. It is impossible to make abstract Scripture the rule of faith for either an individual or a denomination. No Christian body has ever subscribed to the Bible merely as a printed book. A person who should write his name on the blank leaf of the Bible and say that his doctrinal belief was between the covers, would convey no definite information as to his creed.”¹ Simply having the word *Church* on a sign in front a building does not guarantee that this is a Biblical Church.² Creeds and confessions are essential to the purity of the church. As such, once they are neglected or worse yet, dispensed with, that church becomes susceptible to be tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine. The English word “Church” can be traced back to the Greek adjective KURIAKOS, lit. “The Lord’s” or “belonging to the Lord” (the word is found in I Cor. 11:20 and Rev. 1:10). The German word KIRCHE and the Scottish KIRK are sister terms from which the English word probably evolved. The Greek word is EKKLESIA, and the Latin, ECCLESIA, is a simple transliteration of the Greek from whence we have coined the theological category ECCLESIOLOGY. George Barna affirms that belonging to the universal and invisible Church is the only thing that really matters. Therefore, association and involvement in a local church is not all that important. The scriptures clearly make a distinction between the *universal* church of all ages, the elect “the heavenly Jerusalem the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven” (Heb. 12:22-

23) and the local visible congregations. For example, the historic Protestant creeds distinguish between the *visible* church and the *invisible* church (cf. Westminster Confession (1646), chapter 25; the Scottish Confession of Faith (1560), chapters 16 and 18). But Barna, like so many Evangelicals, does not see the importance of creeds and confessions, and as such does not even mention them. After all, this modern mindset (which is ensnared in what C. S. Lewis called chronological snobbery) confidently declares, “Who really cares about such old dusty and antiquated things like creeds and confessions?” It is a sad fact, but Christians who ignore them simply impoverish themselves. The importance of creeds and confessions therefore cannot be underestimated. The Westminster Confession elaborates on the doctrine of the church when it says, “The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan” (25:5). This statement does not purport to tell us how we may “rate” churches in a dubious condition, nor does the Confession commend believers to “less pure” churches which have not yet fully degenerated into synagogues of Satan (Rev. 2:9). Rather, the Westminster Confession lets stand the previous credal doctrine that calls upon men to seek out a true church, one clearly discerned by the right marks. The marks of the church are treated in The Confession of the English Congregation at Geneva (1556), the French Confession of Faith (1559), articles 26-28; the Scottish Confession of Faith (1560), chapters 16 and 18, and the Belgic Confession of Faith (1561), articles 27-29; Second Helvetic Confession (1566), chapter 17. French Confession of Faith (1559), article 27. The Belgic Confession (1561) says, “We believe that we ought diligently and circumspectly to discern from the Word of God which is the true Church, since all the sects which are in the world assume to themselves the name of the Church” (article 29). The Scottish Confession says, “Because that Satan from the beginning has laboured to deck his pestilent synagogue with the title of the kirk of God, and has inflamed the hearts of cruel murderers to persecute, trouble, and molest the true kirk and members thereof it is a thing most requisite that the true kirk be discerned from the filthy synagogue, by clear and perfect notes, lest we, being deceived, receive and embrace to our own condemnation the one for the other” (chapter 18). Belgic Confession, Article 28. In some cases, there may not be a preexisting true congregation near a believer’s home. Still, the imperative to separate from false churches remains. In such irregular circumstances, where there is not an acceptable preexisting church, the believer would be encouraged to help form one or, perhaps, move to a location near a true congregation. During the Reformation, Protestants formed numerous “house churches” sometimes called *privy congregations*, and often held “underground” meetings. (See Second Helvetic Confession, chapter 17).³ It is the responsibility of the church to preserve the truth of the Gospel and the doctrines taught by the apostles. Jude 3 highlights this important truth.

I. THE NEED FOR PREPARATION: THE CHURCH’S RESPONSIBILITY TO PRESERVE THE FAITH.

Notice how this is linked to the truth of the Gospel (our common salvation). The apostle has a sense of urgency. The expression translated *very eager* in the ESV is *PASAN SPOUDEN*, which underscores earnest and careful intent. The Old puritan William Jenkyn wrote concerning this “it signifies an earnest and serious bending, application, and intention of the mind about the things which we are doing; and this is study. It imports also such a serious bending of the mind, as is with a fear of the future event; and this is care, carefulness, or solicitude. It also signifies a speedy and cheerful putting a thing in execution; and this is diligence, and festination, forwardness, haste.”⁴

II. THE CONTINUING PRESENCE OF FALSE TEACHERS DEMANDS CONFRONTATION.

The truth demands that error be refuted. A Faith not worth defending is not worth holding. As Warfield put it, “He who is accustomed to defend only the *minimum* is singularly apt to come to undervalue the undefended *maximum*. A truth not worth defending very soon comes to seem to him not worth professing.”⁵ *The Faith* refers here to the content of what is believed *fides quae creditur* as opposed to *fides qua creditur* – the act of believing. This is Faith must be not only

affirmed, but defended. The word translated *contend* in the ESV is *EPAGONIZESTHAI* means “to exert intense effort.”⁶ This Faith is a *trust* that must be preserved and transmitted. Manton wrote long ago: “The office of the church is to preserve the truth, and transmit it pure to the next age. As the law was kept in the ark, so was truth delivered to the church to be kept: 1 Tim. i. 11, ‘The glorious gospel committed to my trust.’ There is a trust lieth upon us; upon the apostles first to publish the whole counsel of God, and then upon pastors and teachers in all ages to keep it afoot, and upon all believers and members of the church to see that after ages be not defrauded of this privilege. We are to take care that nothing be added, Deut. iv. 2, and xii. 32; there is enough ‘to make the man of God perfect;’ nothing diminished; none of the jewels which Christ hath left with his spouse must be embezzled; that it be not corrupted and sophisticated, for we are not only to transmit to the next age the scriptures, those faithful records of truth, but also the public explications of the church in summaries and confessions must be sound and orthodox, lest we entail a prejudice upon those that are yet unborn.”⁷

CONCLUSION: I close this brief look at what our Reformed Confessions have to say about our subject with this quote from Samuel Miller, one of the founding faculty members of Princeton Theological Seminary. “It is the general principle of the enemies of creeds that all who profess to believe the Bible, ought, without further inquiry, to unite; to maintain ecclesiastical communion; and to live together in peace. But is it not manifest, that the only way in which those who essentially differ from each other concerning the fundamental doctrines of the gospel can live together in perfectly harmonious ecclesiastical fellowship is by becoming indifferent to truth: in other words, by becoming persuaded that modes of faith are of little or no practical importance to the Church, and are, therefore, not worth contending for; that clear and discriminating views of Christian doctrine are wholly unnecessary, and of little use in the formation of Christian character? But in proportion as professing Christians are indifferent to truth, will they not be apt to neglect the study of it? And if the study of it be generally neglected, will not gross and deplorable ignorance of it eventually and generally prevail? The fact is, when men love gospel truth well enough to study it with care, they will soon learn to estimate its value; they will soon be disposed to ‘contend for it’ against its enemies, who are numerous in every age; and this will inevitably lead them to adopt and defend that ‘form of sound words’ which they think they find in the sacred Scriptures. On the other hand, let any man imbibe the notion that creeds and confessions are unscriptural, and of course unlawful, and he will naturally and speedily pass to the conclusion, that all contending for doctrines is useless, and even criminal. From this the transition is easy to the abandonment of the study of doctrine, or, at least, the zealous and diligent study of it. Thus it is, that laying aside all creeds naturally tends to make professing Christians indifferent to the study of Christian truths, comparatively uninterested in the attainment of religious knowledge; and, finally, regardless, and, of course ignorant of *the faith once delivered to the saints*’”⁸ Present day trends in popular Evangelicalism reveal that Miller’s concerns are justified as John Piper observed. “The recent lamentations of the drift of evangelicalism into pragmatic doctrinally vague, audience-driven, culturally uncritical Christianity are, in my judgment, warranted and needed . . . The political spin doctors who specialize in deflecting attention away from truth onto feelings and relationships and styles have their counterpart in the evangelical tendency to avoid doctrinal disputes by casting issues in terms of demeanor and method rather than truth. Serious disagreements are covered over, while vague language and pragmatic concerns preserve hollow unity at the expense of theological substance and Biblical clarity and power . . . a major shift . . . has taken place in western evangelicalism where truth has been replaced by pragmatism as the major influencer of thought and life. This path is suicidal.”⁹

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ W.G.T. Shedd *Calvinism Pure & Mixed: A Defense of the Westminster Standards* (rpt. *Banner of Truth*, 1986) p. 152
- ² Aberrant Churches abound! Here are just a couple of examples: There are a number of Christian Nudists camps across the country with worship services and Bible Studies (clothing optional but discouraged). They have *Evangelical* doctrinal statements and claim representatives from among every major denomination. <http://www.alittleleaven.com/2007/08/christian-nudis.html>. Especially disturbing are the growing number of professing Evangelical churches that have become excessively preoccupied with sex as a drawing card. Not long ago, a mega-church here in Mesa advertised XXX rated sermons with a parental notice alerting parents that material in the Sunday Service was inappropriate for children! Mark Driscoll has achieved nationwide notoriety as “the cussing pastor.” His church in Seattle – Mars Hill, has a website that contains a MH-17 Warning: Under 17 Requires Adult permission. They have a link to a group known as *Christian Nymphos* – a group of women who offer very explicit advice on how to spice-up the bedroom. Churches who mimic this kind of trendy stuff are on the increase. Ed Young, the pastor of the second largest mega church in the U.S.A., gained nationwide attention by doing a series of explicit sermons on sex using a king size bed as a back drop. His language is laced with profanity, including words like “crap,” “screwed,” “hell” and presumably milder but still scatological (bathroom humor) words like “stinks” and “poopyhead.” Oh, and of course, “sucks.” http://www.churchmarketingsucks.com/archives/2009/06/ed_young_the_cu.htm.
- ³ For an extended analysis, see Kevin Reed, “The Marks of The Church” available at http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLS/4_shipwr.htm.
- ⁴ William Jenkyn, *Exposition of the Epistle of Jude* (rpt. James & Klock, 1976) p. 54
- ⁵ *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield II* (P & R, 1976) p. 678
- ⁶ *Greek-English Lexicon of The New Testament Based on Semantic Domains I* eds. J.P. Loren and E.A. Nida (United Bible Societies, 1988) p. 496
- ⁷ *The complete works of Thomas Manton V* (rpt. Maranatha Publications, 1971) p. 110
- ⁸ Samuel Miller, *Doctrinal Integrity: The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions and Adherence to Our Doctrinal Standards* (rpt. Presbyterian Heritage Publications 1989) p. 19.
- ⁹ <http://onceuponacross.blogspot.com/2011/06/piper-warren-interview-part-4.html>