

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Nicene Creed		Pastor/Teacher
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IN DEFENSE OF CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS

Embedded in the texts we are examining is the critically important expression “We believe.” The Latin NT has *credimus* (first person plural of *credo*) from which we derive our English word *creed*. What is a creed? What is a confession? Do we need them? Is there any scriptural warrant for having creeds and confessions? People may not like it (even some Christians), but Christianity per se has *always* been a *creedal* religion in that it has *always* been *theological*. It is identified as having certain set beliefs or doctrines. These doctrines give it its distinctive character, and apart from these doctrines it simply does not exist. “Christianity minus intelligible doctrine,” wrote the late Gordon Clark, “is simply unintelligible doctrine minus Christianity.”¹ Carl Trueman made this observation: “I do want to make the point here that Christians are not divided between those who have creeds and confessions and those who do not; rather, they are divided between those who have public creeds and confessions that are written down and exist as public documents, subject to public scrutiny, evaluation, and critique, and those who have private creeds and confessions that are often improvised, unwritten, and thus not open to public scrutiny, not susceptible to evaluation and, crucially and ironically, not, therefore, subject to testing by Scripture to see whether they are true.”² D. A. Carson has stated, “We need to think a bit more about creeds. Christian creeds are affirmations of what Christians believe to be *true*. But it is important to recognize that, *without exception*, creeds came into being, in very large measure, in the cauldron of controversy. As Gerald Bray states, ‘Almost every phrase in the creeds came into being because somebody had questioned some aspect of the Christian faith which then had to be reaffirmed for the benefit of the church as a whole.’ This is important, because most emerging leaders, as far as I can see, affirm at least the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. Thus they are affirming truths born out of controversy, where some people were judged right in the light of Scripture and others wrong in the light of Scripture. Questions of truth, of faithfulness to Scripture, of being right and wrong intersect in the creeds.”³ The Reformed Faith has always put a premium on the importance of creeds and confessions as a way of protecting the church. J. Gresham Machen complained that in his day there were ministers who make a mockery of their ordination vows when they say they affirm the Westminster Confession of Faith – but they resort to language games (i.e., dishonesty) by claiming that they find the confession “useful” or “symbolic of a tradition,” or “a changing expression of the church’s position at a given time,” but not necessarily true.⁴ This message constitutes a brief excursus on the expression, “*We believe*.”

- I. **WHAT IS A CREED OR CONFESSION OF FAITH?** Simply put, a creed is an exhibition of those great doctrines which are alleged to be taught in the Bible. Creeds and confessions are not, in the Protestant tradition, viewed as having the same authority as Scripture.⁵ They only profess to be summaries, which have been drawn from the Scriptures.

II. **THE SCRIPTURAL BASIS FOR CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS.** The early church, notes J. N. D. Kelly, “was from the start a believing, confessing, preaching church. Nothing could be more artificial or more improbable than the contrast so frequently drawn between the Church and the first century, with its pure religion of the Spirit and its almost complete absence of organization, and the nascent Catholic Church, with all its institutional appurtenances, of the late second century.”⁶ The language of the New Testament is explicitly confessional.

- A. **Homologia** is the standard word used in the New Testament to express what is believed or affirmed. The literal meaning of the word is “to speak the same.” It involves making public what is known to oneself so that all may know – a declaration of one’s faith is thus expressed and can be seen in texts like Matt. 10:32; Luke 12:8, and especially Rom. 10:9-10; Philippians 2:11; 1 Tim. 6:12, 12 and Heb. 3:1, 4:14, 10:23 (compare Acts 23:8). In 1 John 2:23, 4:2, 3 and 15, the confession centers on the Lord Jesus Christ. This confession is not a commitment to some vague ideal. It is confession and faith regarding the person and work of the crucified, risen and glorified Lord (Acts 2:36). This confession provides the basis for a confessional document. The faith that is confessed *must* have *content*. This *homologia* came to represent the agreement or consensus in which the Christian community was united. It referred to that core of essential conviction and belief to which Christians subscribed and openly testified: “The *homologia* was the admission and acknowledgment of the individual’s loyalty to Jesus Christ, and as such, represented a personal testimony of his faith.”⁷
- B. **The faith we confess** (Heb. 4:14). The exhortation is to *hold fast* to our confession. The verb *kratomen* means to cling to with resolve. There is an active sense of determination, one that is like that expressed by Ruth to Naomi (Ruth 1:14-18). The word for confession, *homologia*, as noted above, already appeared (3:1). It is used in the book of Hebrews of some outward acknowledgment of our allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ.⁸
- C. **The hope we confess** (Heb. 10:23). As in Hebrews 4:14, the writer is exhorting his readers to *hold unswervingly* to their confession. You will note that in 10:21 the exhortation is to draw near to God. This presupposes a very explicit understanding of the character of God and why it is that sinners can approach such a God. Why the change from the *faith we confess* to the *hope we confess*? “The content of this confession is the expectation that Christ will fulfill all the promises He has made and that all those who profess hope, a virtue he has emphasized throughout his epistle (3:6, 6:11, 19, 7:19, 10:23). Hope relies on faith and looks to the future.”⁹

III. **WHY ARE CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS NECESSARY?** You will often hear someone say, “I have no creed but the Bible!” That may sound pious, but it is really not – what is indirectly implied by that statement is this: “I have no creed, but the Bible . . . as *I* interpret it.” *Everybody* has a creed. Some are written and can therefore be examined and compared with Scripture, while others are unwritten but serve to bind people nonetheless to a particular interpretation of the Bible (i.e., the Jehovah’s Witnesses are bound by the interpretation of Charles Taze Russell).

- A. **Creeds are needed to maintain doctrinal integrity.** They serve as a depository or a guardian and a witness to the truth, and this is commended in Scripture (Philippians 2:16; 2 Timothy 1:13; Jude 3).
- B. **Creeds are needed as a witness to the world.** A creed reveals to those outside the faith what a body of believers holds. It identifies them (1 Timothy 3:14-16). In a world where *many* (strong emphasis here) are claiming the Bible as the basis for their beliefs (groups ranging all the way from King James only fanatics to New Age mystics), it is

essential that a Church have a confessing standard whereby it may identify itself from such heterodoxical groups.

- D. ***Creeds are needed to preserve the unity of the Church.*** Creeds are often apologetic and polemic in nature; indeed this is necessary. Error is to be exposed and refuted, and creeds serve this noble purpose, but creeds also serve to unite like-minded believers (2 Timothy 2:14-19). Samuel Miller (1769-1850), the first professor of Church History at Princeton Theological Seminary, summed up the matter, declaring: "Christians, collectively as well as individually, are represented in Scripture as witnesses for God. They are commanded to maintain his truth, and to *hold forth the word of life*, in all its purity and luster before a perverse generation, that others may be enlightened and converted. They are exhorted to *buy the truth, and not to sell it; to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints; to hold fast the form of sound words which they have received; and to strive together for the faith of the gospel.* These, and many other commands of similar import, plainly make it the duty of every Christian church to detect and expose prevailing heresies; to exclude all such as embrace radical heresy from their communion; and to *lift up a standard* for truth, whenever *the enemy comes in like a flood.*"¹⁰

CONCLUSION: We are living in a day in which creeds and confessions are held in low esteem by many professing Christians. This is most regrettable. In an age in which *truth*, in any context, is always viewed as relative, Christians need to *affirm* (another word for confess) their faith clearly and precisely so that all may see and know what true orthodox Christianity really is. Increasingly, Evangelicals choose the churches they attend *not* because of any specific doctrinal concerns, but because of the smorgasbord of programs offered to meet "felt needs." What really matters is how I feel and what I experience. Since theology or doctrine does not make me feel good, then I will find a church that caters to my need to feel good. This is, I submit, symptomatic of a very large number of people who flock to the various mega-churches today. But it is also dangerous. It is dangerous because it is impossible to live the Christian life in the absence of Christian truth. Confessional statements like the Westminster Confession of Faith are summary statements of what God has told us in His Word.¹¹ Any confession, however, must do more than simply serve as a badge of theological identity. We are told in Romans 10:10 that personal *confession* of faith in Christ is absolutely necessary for salvation. We are, as noted, exhorted to "hold fast our *confession*" (Hebrews 4:14), and to "hold unwaveringly to the hope we *confess.*" Dorothy Sayers, renowned English writer, friend of C.S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, and a very perceptive Christian, wrote with her characteristic forcefulness, "The one thing I am here to say to you is this: that it is worse than useless for Christians to talk about the importance of Christian morality unless they are prepared to take their stand upon the fundamentals of Christian theology. It is a lie to say dogma does not matter; it matters enormously. It is fatal to let people suppose that Christianity is only a mode of feeling; it is virtually necessary to insist that it is first and foremost a rational explanation of the universe. It is hopeless to offer Christianity as vaguely idealistic aspirations of a simple and consoling kind; it is, on the contrary, a hard, tough, exacting and complex doctrine steeped in drastic and uncompromising realism."¹²

ENDNOTES

¹ Gordon H. Clark, *In Defense of Theology* (Mott Media, 1984), p. 119.

² Carl Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Crossway, 2012), p. 15.

³ D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with The Emergent Church* (Zondervan, 2005), p. 150. In a footnote, Carson further points out, “Since this is true of *all* creeds, it is hard to see why so many of the emerging church leaders are so suspicious of Reformation creeds. These, too, were born in controversy. If they are to be questioned, it cannot be because they say certain things are right and others are wrong (and therefore offend the sensibilities of hard post-moderns), because the same charge could be leveled against the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. The only appropriate response, for those with a higher view of the authority of Scripture than of the creeds, is to try to evaluate, as humbly and accurately as we can, how faithfully any creed reflects Scripture.”

⁴ J. Gresham Machen: *Selected Shorter Writings* ed. D. G. Hart (P&R, 2004), p. 463.

⁵ Brian McLaren, one of the leading voices in the Emergent Church, affirms the importance of the Apostles’ Creed and Nicene Creed and “that Scripture itself remains above creeds, and that the Holy Spirit may use Scripture to tweak our creedal understandings and emphasis from time to time,” cf. his *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Zondervan, 2004), p. 28. But given McLaren’s adoption of a post-modern epistemology (the denial of absolute truth claims for example, he declares that biblical fidelity is not tied in some ways to questions of truth, p. 165). D. A. Carson rightly asks, “But *why* is Scripture given this unique status? Is it simply because more Christians acknowledge the authority of Scripture than the authority of this or that creed? Why cannot I hear any emerging leader saying that Scripture is more authoritative *precisely because it is God-revealed and true*, and that creeds must be tested (and, if necessary, revised) by Scripture, and not vice versa, *for precisely this reason?*” op. cit., p. 94. McLaren’s appeal for “a generous orthodoxy” is a smokescreen for his own heterodoxical views. He denies the existence of Satan, eternal punishment, salvation exclusively through Christ; he explicitly rejects any notion of penal substitutionary atonement, he rejects the inerrancy of Scripture, he affirms evolution, and is ambivalent as to whether or not homosexual behavior and abortion are morally wrong. Yet he calls himself an evangelical, and *Time* magazine’s February 7, 2005 issue listed him as one of the 25 most influential evangelicals in America.

⁶ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (Longmans, 1950), p. 7.

⁷ V. H. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (Eerdmans, 1963), p. 145. He writes elsewhere the word “confession” denotes, not only testimony regarding one’s personal conviction regarding Christ, but also served as a test of orthodoxy (p. 18).

⁸ Faith is often discussed theologically with the Latin expression *fides qua* and *fides quae*. The first refers to *the act* of believing or confession (as in Heb. 11). The second is used of *the content* of faith. “For Christian believers this content consists both of God’s revelation in creation, incarnation, and inscripturation and of what men and women of God in confessional obedience (and disobedience) have done with this revelation.” This content of faith is often called *fides quae* – articles of faith (Jude 3).” Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Eerdmans, 1992), p. 105.

⁹ Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Hebrews* (Baker, 1984), p. 289.

¹⁰ Samuel Miller, *Doctrinal Integrity: The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions and Adherence to Our Doctrinal Standards* (rpt. Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1989), p. 11.

¹¹ This theme is handsomely developed by R. Scott Clark in his article, “The Importance of Being More than Earnest” in *Modern Reformation* (Sept./Oct., 1996), pp. 10-12.

¹² Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (Methuen, 1947), p. 28.