

WHY WE HAVE CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS

For many of us, first trusting in Jesus Christ was very simple: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13). Although we had a basic knowledge of who Jesus was and who we were, now as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ we are called to pursue the Lord with all that we are, loving him with our hearts, our souls, and our minds (Matt. 22:37).

Not only is this true of each of us individually, but this is also true corporately of the Church, not only here and now, but throughout the ages of history. One of the ways the Christian Church has expressed its knowledge and faith through the centuries is in the great creeds and confessions. The creeds and confessions are the expression of the Church’s faith, and by studying them, we grow in our knowledge and love of the Lord.

“But our church has no creed but Christ!” No doubt, you too have heard this from many Christians or have said it yourself. This bumper-sticker type slogan has virtually become a part of what it means to be Christian in contemporary churches. Have you ever stopped to think about what this statement means, though? This slogan is actually one of the most ironic statements anyone can make. You see, when a person or even a church states that they have “no creed but Christ,” they are ironically, in fact, making a “creed.” To say, “I have no creed,” is itself a creed! What we as Christians need to understand is that this is not a biblical way of thinking or acting, but in fact, shows that Christians have been influenced by modern philosophy. When someone makes the statement, “I have no creed but Christ,” he is actually falling into the trap of popular modern philosophy, when it says, “There is no absolute truth;” for, the statement, “There is no absolute truth” is itself a statement of absolute truth!

Let us all agree that everyone, including Christians and churches, have some system of belief behind what they say. Whether they speak of believing a particular creed or confession of faith or none at all, they all have a theology and way of thinking. Anytime you explain simply to a friend what you believe, whether he is a believer or an unbeliever, you are confessing your creed; you are confessing your faith in a way that explains how you understand the Bible.

What are Creeds and Confessions?

Since we all have a personal creed and a way of confessing our faith to the world, this shows us that creeds and confessions of faith are not bad things. We should not let the word “creed” frighten us. Therefore, when you hear us say, “We believe the Apostles’ Creed,” or, “We believe what the Heidelberg Catechism teaches,” do not think this means that we are somehow part of the Roman Catholic Church. Instead, to be a “confessional church” is to be a church that believes and confesses the Word of God as summarized in the great creeds and confessions of the historic Church; it is to be a church firmly rooted in the Scriptures. From the very beginning of Israel’s life as a community through its maturation in the New Testament church, the people of God have confessed what they believe with brief summaries of the Faith. We call these summaries “creeds and confessions.”

Before the label “Roman Catholic” came to be what it is in our understanding, believers in the LORD and in Jesus Christ had creeds and confessions. Our English word “creed” is a literal translation of the Latin word *credo*, which means, “I believe.” A “confession” is a more detailed explanation of the Christian Faith, and this word also comes from a Latin root, meaning, “I publicly declare.” Notice how saying “I believe” involves knowing something, speaking something, and trusting something despite the world’s discouragement.

Where Are Creeds & Confessions in the Bible?

The practice of writing out summary statements of the Faith, which lives in the hearts and is confessed by the mouths of God's people, is as old as the Church itself. We find in both the Old and New Testaments of the Holy Scriptures basic summary statements of the Faith of God's people.

Old Testament

In the Old Testament, the people of God were like a little child confessing their faith in a very simple way. The primary confession of faith of Israel is what is called the Shema, which is the Hebrew word for "hear." We find the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4, which says, "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God: the LORD is one!" These words were recited every morning and evening by God's people (Deut. 6:7). Understand also the context in which the LORD gave this confession of faith to Israel: their exodus out of Egypt. After leaving the "house of slavery" (Exod. 20:2), the LORD saved Israel from the armies of Egypt by leading them through the Red Sea on dry ground (Exod. 14:22). After this climactic display of the LORD's power in salvation and judgment, the LORD spoke his words to Moses, who then wrote them down for the people of God. In Deuteronomy 6, we have Moses' command to the people of God to express their faith and commitment in the LORD by reciting this brief, radical creed. It was radical because they had just come out of Egypt, which had many "gods," and they were about to enter the land of the Canaanites, who had many "gods" themselves. So it was in the midst of false religion and idolatry that the Israelites confessed to the nations around them, that the LORD alone was "God of gods" and "Lord of lords" (Ps. 136:2–3), while the "gods" of the nations were merely "silver and gold, the work of men's hands" (Ps. 115:4).

New Testament

With the coming of the Son of God in human flesh in the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ in "the fullness of time" (Gal. 4:4), the people of God reached an age of maturity. Therefore, the creeds and confessions that we read throughout the New Testament are many in number, and a fuller expression of the belief of God's people.

The primary New Testament confession of faith is Peter's statement, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matt. 16:16). Peter's confession of Jesus consists of two points. First, Jesus is "the Christ," that is, he is the Messiah, the anointed One. In the Old Testament, there were three anointed "offices"—prophet, priest, and king. These anointed ones were the leaders of Israel. Therefore, when Peter calls Jesus "the Christ," he is confessing that he is the final anointed prophet, priest, and king of God's people and the One promised and hoped for in the Old Testament. In addition, as the Messiah, he is the Savior of his people. Second, Jesus is confessed to be "the Son of the Living God." To be "the Son" of God means that Jesus Christ is eternal with God, that is, he is God!

Later on in the life of the Church, as the good news of Jesus Christ began spreading into the Gentile world, the Apostles gave the Church fuller creeds and confessions. Because they would soon die, the Apostles gave these more detailed creeds and confessions to the Church to record their teaching for generations to come.

Thus in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 Paul passes down the truths he received, "That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures." Notice that Paul says this creed was not his own, but it had been passed down to him. One generation passes down the Christian Faith to another as a witness of what God has done. This is

one of the reasons the historic Christian Church has included a confession of faith in public worship from the earliest of days of the Church. Paul also says he passed down the simple gospel: Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. Moreover, these events of history were "according to the Scriptures," that is, the Old Testament. Creeds, therefore, are not our own opinions, but a testimony of what God has done in sending his Son Jesus Christ.

The Epistle to the Ephesians is the epistle of the Church since its main theme is ecclesiology, the doctrine of the Church. In Ephesians 4:4-6, Paul records what scholars understand as a creed that a new convert to Christianity recited at baptism. Notice that this creedal statement speaks in very broad terms, saying, "There is one body . . . one Spirit . . . one hope . . . one Lord . . . one faith . . . one baptism . . . one God and Father." The most striking thing about this creed is that there are seven articles, or points of faith. Seven, of course, is the biblical number that oftentimes signifies completion. What we have in this creed, then, is the Christian Faith in summary. As well, this creed confesses that this truth unites us. Unlike the popular slogan which says, "Doctrine divides," creeds are not meant to divide the Body of Christ, but they are in fact unifying statements. Notice that the creed in Ephesians 4:4-6 confesses that there is one body, one Spirit, etc.

A final example of a New Testament creed are the words of 1 Timothy 3:16. Paul's words as recorded in first and second Timothy were among his last. He wrote to Timothy, the young pastor of the church in Ephesus. Paul desired to visit him (3:14), but until he came, he wanted Timothy to understand how to live within the household of God (3:15). First Timothy, then, is a kind of church order, that is, a rule book on how to pray, worship, teach, lead, choose elders and deacons, minister to widows, the rich, the poor, etc. In 1 Timothy 3:16 Paul says, "And confessedly great is the mystery of piety: Who was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory." Paul actually begins this creed with a preface, using the Greek work for "confession," which I have translated as "confessedly." Notice also that this confession of faith is not merely for the mind, but for our lives. "Piety" is the believers' reverent response to God in all areas of his life as he/she seeks to show his/her gratitude. Creeds are utterly practical and devotional for us as Christians as they guide us in our thoughts about God and our prayers to God. This creed is a devotional aid for our piety because it focuses our hearts and minds upon the work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

These texts of Scripture, both from the Old and New Testament, show us that creeds and confessions are not only what stuffy, "dead orthodox" churches have, or only what "Catholics" believe. Instead, Christians throughout the generations have written and recited creeds to express the faith that lives in their hearts.

Are Creeds and Confessions Necessary?

The early Church needed creeds and confessions. Jesus command his people to confess their faith, saying, "Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 10:32; NASB). As well, the Apostle Paul said, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved" (Rom. 10:9-10).

When the Apostles died and the Church was busy fulfilling Jesus' command to "go into all the nations" (Matt. 28:19), there were two extremely urgent needs that confronted the confessing Church. First, all

the new converts to Christianity had to be taught the Christian Faith so that they could declare their allegiance to Jesus Christ. They had to be “catechized.” This word comes from the Greek verb *katecheo*, which occurs eight times in the New Testament (Luke 1:4; Acts 18:25, 21:21, 24; Rom. 2:18; 1 Cor. 14:19; Gal. 6:6). It is a compound Greek word from *kata*, “down,” and *echeo*, “sound;” thus meaning, “I sound down.” Catechism is teaching with questions and answers. The early Church needed a basic way to guide new members of Christ’s Church into knowledge of what they believed. In the early church the basic outline of “new members classes” were the Apostles’ Creed, the Sacraments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. Second, the early Church had to stand strong in the Faith of the Scriptures against many “heresies,” or false teachings. To confront and reject false teaching, the earliest churches gathered to write, for example, the Nicene Creed. Since representatives from the whole Church in those days gathered to write this creed, it is an “ecumenical” creed. The word “ecumenical” simply means “general” or “universal.” The whole Church wrote them, and the whole Church believed them.

How Are These Creeds & Confessions Practically Used?

Besides the above reasons for believing these creeds and confessions, there are also several practical reasons for believing these statements of the Faith, which have an effect on our identity as a congregation.

They are the Basis for Our Fellowship

The practical effect of these creeds and confessions is church unity. The Church of the Lord Jesus Christ is not a divided collection of individual, lone-ranger Christians, or individual parts, but is a single, united body in which each individual member is united in their faith. Although we are many, we are one body in Christ (Rom. 12:5). As members of a Reformed church, we all confess the same Faith in matters of essentials. We see in the New Testament the apostle Paul praying for unity to become increasingly true within the churches. He prays that we would be “like-minded toward one another” and that we “may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:5–6 cf. Phil. 1:27).

They are Teaching Aids

Another practical aspect of these creeds and confessions is that we use them as a basis for our teaching, from the earliest age of children in Sunday school and at home, to teaching adults to be prepared to give an answer for the hope that is within them (1 Pet. 3:15). The New Testament teaches the necessity of having a unified theology because the people of God are always tempted to “turn aside to fables” (2 Tim. 4:4) and be “tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14). Instead, we are called to hold on to the “pattern of sound words” (2 Tim. 1:13), the “form of doctrine . . . once for all delivered to the saints” (Rom. 6:17; Jude 3), and the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). Within the Church, the Lord has given the responsibility to pastors and elders to heed our Lord’s words to teach disciples “all things that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19–20).

They Protect the Flock from Heresy

Because the Church has always existed in the midst of perilous times, her members need protection from wolves by her shepherds. As Paul warns young pastor Timothy, in these “latter times” (1 Tim. 4:1) false teachers will come. Therefore, the apostle John calls us to be discerning and to “test the spirits, whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

John does not call us to test the spirits by the numerical and financial results a teacher or church has, nor by how charismatic and out-going a teachers' personality is. We must test the spirits by examining a doctrinal confession (1 John 4:1–3; 1 Tim. 4). Paul commanded the elders of the church in Ephesus to examine doctrine, saying, "Savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock . . . speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples" (Acts 20:29–30). By believing and confessing a clear, systematic, and comprehensive system of truth, we are less likely to see our sheep drawn away. This also equips the elders to better warn and protect the sheep of Christ (Titus 1:9).

They Provide a Public Standard for Church Discipline

Summaries of the Christian Faith in creeds and confessions also provide an object standard by which the Church is to discipline those in error, whether doctrinal or ethical. This is eminently practical in our day in which too many churches have sprung up from a person's desire to be a pastor and in which people flock to a church based on feelings, preferences, and "successful" ministries. What happens in these types of churches is that the pastor is a pope and there is no accountability structure except "what the pastor says, goes." Thus, people are excommunicated, dis-fellowshipped, and shunned without any biblical steps of reconciliation, simply because of personal differences or not agreeing with the pastor. In a Reformed church this is not so. If a member should stray from the truth, other members and the elders have a way of objectively identifying their error. The same holds true for ethical error within the church. Church discipline, then, is not a case of the pastor versus someone teaching contrary to his doctrine, of a person who sins being immediately kicked out, but it is a loving process delineating between truth and error (Rom. 16:17).

They Provide a Standard to Evaluate Teaching

The above description of discipline holds true for the pastor as well. The pastor is a servant of Christ; he is not untouchable. How, then, does a member of a church identify error in a church? By comparing the official teaching of the church to what is taught. The confessions, then, keep a pastor from straying into his own ideas or novel doctrines. He must be careful to teach and preach only the apostolic doctrine that has been handed down to him: "commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2).

They Witness to the Truth to those Outside the Church

Finally, our creeds and confessions serve us by defining the gospel of salvation for a fallen world as well as the eternal punishment to be suffered by those who reject it. Jesus called the church "the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14). Yet, we can only function as light if we continue in the truth. We live in an age in which many groups claiming to be churches darken and pervert the truths of the Bible. This has compromised the uncompromising and urgent message of Scripture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we reiterate that we are a confessional church because to be so means that we are a biblical church—since God's holy Word is the foundation of our beliefs and tests all that a Reformed Church believes and does—and an historic church because—since creeds unite us to the transcendent reality that there has always been a church and it has always believed certain essential teachings. Our prayer is that you too will see the great creeds and confessions of the ancient Church and Protestant Reformation as lost treasures desperately needed in today's world—and by you.

Rev. Daniel R. Hyde, Oceanside United Reformed Church | oceansideurc.org