

—The Creedal Imperative—

The importance of Creeds and Confessions for maintaining the unity and purity of the visible Church *Lesson 1*

- I. By *Creed* or *Confession of Faith*, we mean a written exhibition of some great doctrines which the writers believe to be taught in the Bible.
 - A. Creeds and confessions are human attempts to summarize and express the basic elements of the Christian faith as revealed in the Bible.
 - B. Creeds and Confessions don't claim to establish opinions as truths or make anything to be truth that wasn't truth before. They attempt to summarize some of the leading truths taught in the Bible, which all men ought to believe because the Bible teaches them, and which a certain portion of the visible church has agreed to use as a formula by which they may know and understand one another.
 - C. All creedal formulations are subordinate to Scripture and subject to correction by Scripture. *Thus, Scripture alone is the *norming Norm* while the church's adopted Creeds are the *normed Norms*.
- II. The Church is a confessing institution bound together by a doctrinal profession of faith.
 - A. That credible profession of faith which secures one's membership in the church is a doctrinal profession (I believe God raised Christ from the dead), and a public statement (I confess Jesus to be Lord), Rom 10.9-10.
 - B. When a person wanders away from sound doctrine, he's being divisive and ceases to belong to the church, which is bound together by their profession of faith in sound doctrine, Rom 16.17; 2Th 3.14; Tit 3.10. Contrary to the modern notion, then, that doctrine divides, Paul says it's the very thing that unites.
 - C. And given that belonging to the Christian community requires a minimal doctrinal content, Paul also assumes that church members will grow over time in their knowledge of the Bible's doctrinal teaching, 1Cor 3.1; Heb 5.11-6.3. Thus, the bar of doctrinal knowledge is set low for initial belonging; but the expectation is that this knowledge will grow and deepen as the believer matures within the context of the Christian community—under the regular preaching and teaching of the Word of God.
 - D. The task of making sure this maturing takes place belongs to the elders of the church, which is one of the reasons why there's a difference between qualifications for belonging to the church and holding office in the church, 1Tim 3.1-11; Tit 1.9-12; 2.1; OPC vows for church officers.
 - E. In order to see that the faith entrusted to the church's officers is faithfully carried on from generation to generation, the church has developed a tried-and-trusted *vocabulary* to express the great doctrines of Scripture (e.g., trinity, incarnation, atonement, total depravity, justification by faith, election, covenant of grace, etc.) along with several tried-and-trusted *creedal formulations* to house that vocabulary.
 - F. The point is, the Christian church has an established, conventional vocabulary for orthodox teaching which not only helps the church in her task of educating her members but also establishes helpful and normative signposts of what is and what is not orthodox.
 - G. This vocabulary and these formulations are the form of sound words that the church uses as a standard of teaching by which to judge a person's orthodoxy, 2Tim 1.13; 1Tim 3.16; 2Tim 2.11-13; 1Cor 15.3-5. Paul often uses previously established phraseology, a form of sound words, to capture the gospel's vocabulary in a nutshell, cf. Phil 2.5-10; 1Tim 1.15; 2Tim 3.16.
 - H. Therefore to claim to have "No Creed but the Bible" is problematic, because the Bible itself demands that we have forms of sound words, and that's what creedal formations are, acceptable forms of sound words, cf. 2Tim 1.9-10, 13; 2Th 2.15; 3.6.
 - I. The content of the gospel is to be handed down from generation to generation and the best way to do this is through the church's creedal formulations, Ps 78.1-8; Josh 4.19-24; Ex 12.24-27. Likewise, theological synthesis is part of the church's task, and this is facilitated by creedal formations.

III. The Usefulness of Creeds and Confessions

A. All Churches and All Christians Have Creeds and Confessions

1. No church or Christian simply believes the Bible. Everyone holds to a synthesis and summary of what he believes the Bible teaches. He may not write it down, but he holds to it nonetheless.

B. Confessions delimit the power of the church.

1. Adopted confessions describe the message which the church is to preach and it limits the church's power to what is contained within that document.
 - a) In a church where the minister has "no creed but the Bible," how would it handle a situation in which a minister suddenly decided the Bible teaches that all Christians should wear clothes of a certain style? Or a situation in which a minister suddenly became convinced that our firstborn sons should go into ministry?
 - b) In a church where the minister has "no creed but the Bible" there's no one and no means to contradict him if he preaches like a Unitarian one Sunday and a Trinitarian the next. The church is at the mercy of the minister, whose creed is private and not open to critique.
2. A *public, church-sanctioned confession* creates a church community where what's regarded as normal belief and practice is publicly stated, can be challenged and tested by Scripture, and allows both elders and laypeople to know exactly where they stand in relationship to each other.
 - a) A confession states clearly that for which a church stands and thus allows the people to know what to expect from the eldership, and, most importantly, when the eldership is overstepping its bounds.

C. Creeds and confessions offer succinct and thorough summaries of the faith.

1. Creeds and confessions focus the church's mind on the main thing. When we consider how old some of the church's confessions are, it indicates that they address the perennials of Christian existence.
 - a) A church with a creed or a confession has a built-in gospel reality check. It's unlikely to become sidetracked by the peripheral issues of the passing moment; rather, it will focus on the great theological categories that touch on matters of eternal significance.
2. Creeds and confessions only cover the really basic topics of Christian doctrine so as to protect the church from making one's own issues *the* issues.
 - a) And if we're tempted to think these confessions to be too long, we should ask ourselves if we really want a church confession that said nothing about the doctrine of Scripture, or the doctrine of God, or the nature of justification, or the definition of the church? We might disagree with the content of a particular confession, but we can't really argue that it doesn't represent some of the basic concerns of the Bible itself.
3. It must be understood, however, that for a church to maintain a consistency orthodox witness, a certain level of complexity is necessary in her doctrinal statements in order for them to be theologically stable.
 - a) Take, for example, the doctrine of the incarnation. In order to maintain this basic Christian belief, one needs an understanding of what deity is, what humanity is, whether or not sin is inherent to humanity, and a trinitarian understanding of God, otherwise he'll fall off the path into the ditch of modalism or tritheism.
 - b) Likewise, it's not enough to simply say, "we believe in justification by faith." One needs to define God, creation, God's image, the impact of the fall, the nature of righteousness, and what constitutes faith, imputation, reconciliation, etc.
 - c) In order for a confession to be succinct its statements require a certain amount of complexity that assumes the parameters and influence of its broader doctrinal matrix.