

**“... by faithfully doing and teaching all that Christ commands,
as summarized in the Westminster Standards”**

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1. Introduction: Why do we have a confession of faith - the Westminster Standards?

One of the worst ways anyone could ever study church history would be in a cold detached fashion. Just to hear the hallowed stories of the courage of Athanasius of Alexandria and his courageous and bold stance against seemingly impossible odds for the full deity of Jesus Christ is enough to inspire us. When we remember the tear-stained face of Augustine in that garden where he at last surrendered his life fully to Christ, we cannot help but identify with his struggle to let go of sin and the relief and joy he found in the Savior's warm embrace. It is the same with the study of the great creeds and confessions of the faith. God's Word is absolutely sufficient and clear for - as the Westminster Confession of Faith itself teaches - "not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them. (WCF 1:7 WCS)"

Scripture Alone was the great battle-cry of the Protestant Reformation. The *reason* it was a battle-cry was because it was being *attacked* by the Roman Church. When people professing to follow Christ and love the truth tried to elevate "Tradition" and the "teaching magisterium of the church" *to the same level of authority as Scripture*, they responded to that by:

1. Refuting that idea from Scripture itself
2. Publishing Confessions which condemned such a practice:

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. (WCF 1:6 WCS).

The Deity of Christ and the Triune nature of God: The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ is God in the fullest sense of the meaning of that word. Jesus is not similar to God, like God, or subordinate to God. He is God. This precious and foundational truth has been confused, attacked, and denied by every kind of false teacher imaginable from the first century forward. In fact, the first 7 centuries of church history after the apostles died were almost completely devoted to refuting false teaching concerning the person of Christ and the doctrine of God.

Question: Would it be wise or foolish to take a careful look at those debates and to consider closely what Christians said in publishing creeds to refuse heresy? It is exceedingly wise to look carefully at those creeds - and it is likewise very foolish to ignore them.

Everyone has a creed. Have you ever heard the saying as a basis of rejecting the Reformed Confessions of Faith (like the Westminster Standards)?: "No Creed but Christ!" Or, "No Book but the Bible!" What we need to help people who say these things understand is that the statement: "No Creed but Christ" *is a creed itself*.

A creed is inescapable: The word "creed" simply comes from the Latin word: "credo" which means: "I believe." When we discuss our beliefs over coffee with someone or any time we preface anything we say with the words: "I believe," what follows is, in point of fact, our creed. We all have a *theology* - we all have a *creed*.

The question is not whether or not we will have a creed, but whether or not our creed will be solidly biblical, accurate, and reflect the theological victories that our dear Christian forefathers fought and won *or not*.

The value of precision in creeds and confessions of faith. Illustration: Growing up in a fundamental Christian church, I was taught the basics and I did understand the gospel. However, if you had asked me to define on paper the doctrine of the Trinity, you would likely have received from me an ancient heresy of some kind. The first time I was ever really challenged to define what *I personally believed about the nature of God*, I was 18 years old. I was listening to a Walter Martin tape on Mormonism. There were LDS missionaries all over the place where I was in college at Ohio University, and I wanted to be ready to talk to them. Walter Martin at one point in his lecture talked about a bible class he taught to undergraduate students. For class one day he had the students put everything away except a pencil and a blank sheet of paper. Dr. Martin said to the class: "Define the doctrine of the Trinity." Martin said when he went home and read everything the students wrote: "I got more heresy than Carter had liver pills. I had never seen so many fouled up people in my entire life." At that point, I stopped the tape and asked myself the same question driving around in my car - *How would I define God? How would I define the Trinity?* As it turned out - I was a "modalistic monarchian." I did not understand that the three persons were really and eternally distinct from one another - in my mind, I thought of God as one person who took on three different roles at different times. It was not until I read Walter Martin's book *The Kingdom of the Cults* that I understood biblically and accurately *for the very first time* the Triune nature of God.

Application: Remember, it took battles against heresy and centuries of hard spade-work in the text of God's Word for the church to arrive at a tried, tested, proven, and solid *summary of everything that is said in Scripture about the nature of God*.

A.A. Hodge wrote an excellent commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith which I highly recommend as a worthy addition to anyone's library. In the introduction, Hodge has a section titled: "A Short History of Creeds and Confessions" wherein he makes some very wise statements that I wish every Christian in America would consider carefully:

While, however, the Scriptures are from God, the understanding of them belongs to the part of men. Men must interpret to the best of their ability each particular part of Scripture separately, and then combine all that the Scriptures teach upon every subject into a consistent whole, and then adjust their teachings upon different subjects in mutual consistency as parts of a harmonious system. Every student of the Bible must do this; and all make it obvious that they do it, by the terms they use in their prayers and religious discourse, whether they admit or deny the propriety of human creeds and confessions. If they refuse the assistance afforded by the statements of doctrine slowly elaborated and defined by the Church, they must make out their own creed by their own unaided wisdom. The real question is not, as often pretended, between the Word of God and the creed of man, but between the tried and proved faith of the collective body of God's people, and the private judgment and the unassisted wisdom of the repudiator of creeds.

"**Our Debt to Heresy**" was the title of an old issue of Modern Reformation magazine that had this very thing as its main theme - how false doctrine has always forced the church to be *clear* in its understand of given doctrines. Hodge continues:

... heretics spring up on all occasions, who pervert the Scriptures, who exaggerate certain aspects of the truth and deny others equally essential, and thus in effect turn the truth of God into a lie. The Church is forced, therefore, on the great principle of self-preservation, to form such accurate definitions of every particular doctrine misrepresented as shall include the whole truth and exclude all error; and to make such comprehensive exhibitions of the system of revealed truth as a whole that no one part shall be either unduly diminished or exaggerated, but the true proportion of the whole be preserved.

Classic case in point - the two natures of Christ. Few things are clearer in Scripture than that Jesus of Nazareth was truly a man - he slept, he got hungry, he got thirsty, he experienced joy, sadness, anger, he bled, and he died. He was a man. Few things are likewise clearer in Scripture than that Jesus is God - He is directly referred to as God - John 1:1. He claimed to be the I AM from the burning bush in Exodus 4. He is said to be the Creator of the universe in Colossians 1. And even Jesus' enemies knew exactly what he was claiming:

John 5:17-18 But Jesus answered them, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." [18] Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God.

- Heretics would *exaggerate* certain aspects of the truth and deny others equally essential. Some denied Christ's full humanity and exalted His deity. Others denied Christ's full deity and exalted His humanity.
- After a thorough study of all of Scripture, the church was able to publish creeds to refute the various heresies - the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and the formula of the Council of Chalcedon.
- ***This took time and an incredible amount of sweat and work in the text of Scripture.*** We owe them a great debt of gratitude and we would be highly foolish to refuse to benefit from their work in the text of the Bible *in the name of going only by the Bible*.

The Westminster Standards on "Christ the Mediator" 8.2:

... So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man. **[this represents an incredible amount of work, reflection, and debate about the full biblical teaching on the person of Jesus Christ]**

- **Application:** It was our Christian forefathers' love for the Bible that led them to write out creeds and draw up confessions of faith in the first place - so that the lines could be clearly drawn in the sand - so everyone would see clearly in the face of heresy and false teaching ***what the Bible itself teaching on these given topics***.

Here's an example of a definition that rejects numerous heresies and errors in the process of clearly defining and setting forth what the Scriptures teach about justification (WCF 11.1):

Those whom God effectually calleth He also freely justifieth; **not by infusing righteousness into them**, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous: **not for anything wrought in them, or done by them**, but for Christ's sake alone: **nor by imputing faith itself**, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience, to them as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness, by faith: which faith they have not of themselves; it is the gift of God.

2. A Passionate Confession of the Gospel in the Face of Error - Galatians 1:6-9; Galatians 2:11-21.

Galatians 1:6-9 [6] I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, [7] which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. [8] But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. [9] As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.

- Notice how strong a denunciation of error this is.
- Notice the call to make sure the *gospel* never changes - it is fixed and set in stone.

- **Application:** The truths of Scripture and of the Christian faith are a fixed and unchanging body of truths. This is why *Confessions* of faith are so important *especially in the face of error*.
- **Application 2:** It is one thing to simply hand a Bible to someone and say: "Here is what I believe." It is much better, safer, and clearer if, when asked a specific question about a specific doctrine, you can give a succinct statement of what it is *you believe the Scriptures as a whole teach about that doctrine*.

Galatians 2:11-21 [11] Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; [12] for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. [13] And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. [14] But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews? [15] We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, [16] knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified. [17] But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not! [18] For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor. [19] For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. [20] I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. [21] I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain."

- Notice how Peter was rebuked here - "*before them all*." Peter had failed to be "straightforward about the truth of the gospel" and by refusing to eat with Gentiles had sinned grievously against *many people in a public way*.
- The entire book of Galatians could be seen as an inspired "Confession" of faith against a specific error - the denial of belief *alone* as the *sole* instrument of our justification before God.
- **Application:** Because of its clarity and passion, the book of Galatians emerged mightily in the 16th century Reformation as a mighty fortress against the *many, many* add-ons to the gospel which the Roman Church had perpetrated for centuries. Martin Luther so loved Galatians that he called it by his wife's name - "Paul's letter to the Galatians is my Katy Von Bora."

3. The Jerusalem Council - A Confession of the True Gospel - Acts 15:1-14

Acts 15:1-14 *And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." [2] Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.*

- **Great principle** - plurality of Christian minds addressing the text. There is great benefit in listening to *many* teachers and counselors when difficult questions arise.

Proverbs 11:14 Where there is no counsel, the people fall; But in the multitude of counselors there is safety.

Proverbs 24:6 ... And in a multitude of counselors there is safety.

- **Part of the purpose of gathering was to *silence and refute* the false teachers.**

[3] *So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren. [4] And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles*

and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them. [5] But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses." [6] Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.

- **If we are wise**, we will want to know what their conclusions were after they “considered this matter.”
- **When the elders and ministers in the Netherlands met to “consider” the teachings of the Arminian Remonstrance**, if we are wise, we would want to see their conclusions.
- **When the theologians and ministers in the UK gathered to draft a doctrinal statement** - when this group of men, recognized by nearly everyone (Presbyterians and non-Presbyterians alike) to be the most learned, pious, scholarly group of Christian men to ever sit in a room together in the 2000 years of NT church history behind us, *should we be interested in what they wrote concerning the Christian faith after discussing it for 5 years?* If we are wise, we will!

[7] And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. [8] So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, [9] and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. [10] Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? [14] But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."

- **Notice the clear confession at the end of their deliberations** - v14: “... we believe...” Credo - this is their “Creed!” “... that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.” Not by circumcision, not by dietary laws, not by obedience to the 10 commandments... but through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved...”

4. Closing Illustration - The Chain-link Fence: Think of a church’s doctrinal statement like a chain-link fence intended to protect the sheep inside from predators. The more detailed and precise the church’s confession of faith is, the closer together the steel threads of the chain-link fence are and thus the better protected the sheep are. The looser and more vague the church’s doctrinal statement is, the wider the gaps are between the steel threads of the chain-link fence. Having a confession of faith that is detailed and reflective of the theological battles that have been waged *on the basis of the text of Scripture* as well as the tried and proved exegesis of the text of Scripture from the best and most learned and pious minds throughout church history, is like have a very strong fence with very many, closely knit together steel threads as part of the fence between the sheep on the inside and wolves on the outside. Having no clear doctrine but instead holding to the notion of: “No Creed but Christ” would be identical to having, in effect, no fence at all to protect the sheep.

Application: Every local Christian church on this planet has doctrine. Even if they claim to have none, they still do. We either have biblical, refined, precise and sound doctrine, or we will have unbiblical, unrefined, imprecise, and unsound doctrine. Always remember, the wider the steel threads are in the chain-link fence, the bigger the critters are that can get in and harm the sheep. Having a robust, well-thought out confession of faith like the Westminster Standards is like having a tightly-woven, thick and strong fence protecting all of us. And we can see from the apostolic example afforded to us in Scripture itself that standing against error and *Confessing* the truths of God’s Word that the church of all ages is called upon to do this. Let us not be fools, but wise - and stand with the many counselors and godly Christians who went before us - whose hard work and labors have given us a thoroughly Biblical, tried and true Confession which, if we are wise enough to study and use it properly, will protect us as it protected them.