



Thoughts on the importance of being a Confessional Church.

– Pastor Grant Van Leuven

As it is not uncommon to get questions or objections about our use of confessions/catechisms/creeds for church membership and life, I thought it helpful to share an edited version of one of my email replies on the matter.

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Dear Enquirer,

We believe the Westminster Standards to which we subscribe as a church are an excellent summary of the Scriptures and a helpful tool to preserve orthodoxy (as was and is largely the point of confessions and creeds that are built upon the foundation of the early Church councils and their fights against heresy). Virtually all heretics give lip service to the Bible, but they don't teach what it actually reveals, so creeds are necessary to weed out heretics (as much as is possible) in the Visible Church. In his book, *The Creedal Imperative*, Carl Trueman writes, “Every heretic has his text ... If the pastor is simply ‘teaching the Bible,’ and there is no frame of reference by which the congregation can assess that teaching, then the possibility for abuse of power becomes more real.”

Let me encourage you to meditate on Westminster Larger Catechism Q&A #5 to better appreciate how creeds and confessions (and their complementing catechisms) endeavor to pastorally explain the whole counsel of the Scriptures to Christians while training them in its main emphases: *Q: What do the scriptures principally teach?; A: The scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.* The rest of the Larger Catechism is broken up by sub headings into those two categories and gives special and detailed attention in the latter part to the Ten Commandments, The Word, the Sacraments, and the Lord's Prayer.

Let me share that for some time I was against creeds (while attending a Reformed and confessional church). I have to say, I never even read the creeds to which I was against committing; but over time, the Lord showed me through study and church history their vital importance (some have even expressed having a “second conversion” after reading the *Westminster Confession of Faith*). I hope the information and commentary that follow may help give you more reason to study the historic creeds and consider their usefulness *not* for division, but rather *unity* in the body of Christ. Trueman writes, “Paul himself characterizes deviation from true doctrine as divisive. We might therefore say that to cease to believe is one and the same with ceasing to belong.”

Most who look into our church do so while lamenting the state of the union of the Visible Church; and yet, many do not recognize that our confessions are designed to help govern the Church in preserving her pure doctrine and practice as commanded in Scripture. Trueman explains, “... creeds and confessions are vital to the present and future well-being of the church. ...being reminded of ... the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith ... is a vital part of church life. ...Tried and tested over the years, the best creeds contain solid theology clearly expressed in appropriate language ... They do nothing but ensure that biblical content and priorities are kept upper-most in the public worship of the church. ...A confession ... describes the message which the church is to preach, and it limits the church's power to what is contained within that document. ...Just as a good civil law code defines a well-ordered society and the powers its various estates possess, 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. ... Longevity is one of the great assets that the church's creedal statements have in their favor: they were produced long ago and have withstood the test of time. ... A church with a creed or confession has a built-in gospel reality check. It is unlikely to become sidetracked by the peripheral issues of the passing moment; rather it will focus instead on the great theological categories that touch on matters of eternal significance ... a good confession becomes ... an exciting map of the territory of biblical truth and something to which to aspire. ... A historic confession ... is convenient, honest, and transparent. It leaves nobody in any doubt about what the church is and what she teaches."

Further, Trueman shows that a formal and public church confession is not only a helpful outworking of Scripture, but a Scriptural requirement to be worked out: "the need for creeds and confessions is not just a practical imperative for the church but is also a biblical imperative." He astutely demonstrates this truth pointing to 2 Timothy 1:13: *Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus*. Trueman explains, "The word for 'form' describes a model, form, or standard that is intended to function as a trustworthy or reliable guide ... What is interesting is that Paul does not simply say, 'Make sure you stay true to the conceptual content of what you have been taught.' Paul also highlights the *form* of the words used here." He points out that Paul does not say to just read every word of the Bible: he says bring the general standard to the people in summary words.

Trueman continues, "... To claim to have no creed but the Bible, then, is problematic: the Bible itself seems to demand that we have forms of sound words, and that is what creeds are [he also points to primitive creedal examples in 1 Timothy 1:9-10, Philippians 2:5-10, 1 Timothy 1:15, Romans 1:3-4, 1 Corinthians 8:6, and 1 Peter 3:18-21] ... the time of the apostles is coming to a close, and [Paul needed] to set in place structures to maintain true teaching in the postapostolic world. A form of sound words transmitted by eldership is his way of ensuring good management of the household of God. Continuity of teaching is crucial. This is why elsewhere in his letters he will talk in terms of *tradition*, that which he is *handing on* to those who follow [he cites 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 1 Corinthians 11:2; and 2 Thessalonians 3:6, "where Paul makes conformity to the tradition of his teaching a condition for fellowship"]." As Trueman indicates elsewhere, it would be legitimate to ask someone who claims, "I have no creed but the Bible" to prove this stance is a Biblical one, asking, "Can you please show me in the Bible where you get those words and this doctrine of anti-confessionalism?"

In particular to what our church formally subscribes to, I encourage you to read the quotes by pastors Gordon Clark, J.G. Vos, John Murray, and Chuck Baynard on the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms subpage of the "Resources" tab on our website. Notice that we here link to all the Westminster Standards, which are simply painstaking pastoral works to teach the main doctrines of Scripture in succinct form (using Scripture to prove their doctrines) so that we make better use of the Bible. Trueman notes that a creed is simply "a summary view of what the Bible taught ... Creeds and confessions are human attempts to summarize and express the basic elements of the Christian faith. ... outside of the Bible, the documents that contain more biblical truth per page than anything else are the great creeds and confessions of the church." Our own *Confession of Faith* says of itself that it is not on par with the authority of Scripture (see the *Confession* chapters 1 and 31). Still, it is our conviction that these godly and learned men gave us incredible resources on the Scriptures, and a godly and wise person will have no problem reading them and saying, "I believe that!" and, frankly, "I couldn't have said it better myself!"

These Standards are what we understand as our statement of faith to one another and the world. And if we are willing to be taught by pastors in preaching and teaching then we ought not to have a problem with submitting to the teaching of some of the most wise and godly pastors ever to get together and teach, "What does the Bible say?" If we are willing to open a Bible commentary, we should not fear opening a Biblical confession. Study the Westminster Standards and see if you think they do not teach the Scriptures; and if you find they do, why wouldn't you be willing to say in membership vows, "Yes, this is what I believe the Scriptures teach"?

Related to the need for Confessions (which is the same issue as the need for proper interpretation of the Bible on the whole from a consent of all its parts), please consider:

- Nehemiah 8:7-8: *Also Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place. So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.*
- Acts 8:30-37: *And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip*

that he would come up and sit with him. The place of the scripture which he read was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth: In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth. And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man? Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus. And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. [Notice the eunuch's confession here is something orthodox creeds require, but many heresies that say they use the Bible deny or misinterpret and deny important doctrines of the deity of Christ and thus the doctrine of the Trinity and the truth of saved by faith through the grace of Christ alone -- three of the Five Solas of the Reformation.

Recognize also that one of the Five Solas of the Reformation was "Scripture Alone" and yet the Reformers gave much weight to the formal use of confessions and catechisms in churches to teach in summary form what the Scriptures say, and several wrote such, including Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, Guido de Brès, Heinrich Bullinger, John Calvin, and John Knox.

Consider also some of these helpful statements by John Murray (*Collected Writings: The Claims of Truth*, Volume 1), who cites Nehemiah 8:8 as part of his defense of the creeds:

- "Whenever any humanly-framed document is accorded the place that Scripture occupies in the Christian faith then we have committed the sin of idolatry." ("The Creedal Basis of Union in the Church, 280)
- "More deliberate and mature consideration will ... show the *necessity* of creedal confession and formulation ... Creedal formulation is but one way of giving the sense of Scripture in succinct form ... It is a fact of history that the church in the maintenance and defense of the faith found it necessary to formulate her faith in creedal statement in order to guard the faith against the incursions of error ... The most prolific period of creedal composition was the Reformation. And can we discount the fact that this activity was coincident with the greatest revival of faith since the days of the apostles? It was the fruit of this revival of faith and the expression of it." (Ibid, 281).
- "We must not discount, may I repeat, the situation in history in which God has placed us. This would be retrogression. But, of greater moment, it would be dishonoring to the Holy Spirit who in the unfolding events of providence has been enlightening the church to the fuller understanding of his revealed counsel." (Ibid, 284).
- "Let us prove all things; but let us also hold fast that which is good." ("A Notable Tercentenary", 312)

Also, visit our website link, <http://puritanchurch.com/resources/articles-and-media/doctrine-the-things-we-are-to-believe-concerning-god/>, and look for and read the following articles under the heading, Confessionalism:

A Short History of Creeds and Confessions – A.A. Hodge

Importance of Confessions — RCUS (scroll down a bit to get to the article)

Why We Have Creeds and Confessions — Daniel Hyde

I particularly encourage you to read the article by A.A. Hodge; it is required reading in our membership class, which goes through the Westminster Standards and explains them along with other distinctions of our church.

Do please study these resources and most importantly the Standards themselves with the Scripture proofs, and by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, see if these things are true with the heart of Acts 17:10-11; do also notice that there the Bible comments that the Bereans are particularly noble not only for searching the Scriptures daily to see if what was taught was true, but also because they began their search with a readiness of mind to the likeliness of such being true.

Let me also share a few thoughts to further encourage you to consider the importance of creeds by Joel Beeke and Terry D. Slachter in their book, *Encouragement for Today's Pastors: Help from the Puritans*:

- "The benefit of teaching ordinary people to catechize their families is inestimable." (84) [I have seen in my own life and that of my wife and children that we know and understand our Bible better *because* of studying the Shorter Catechism regularly in family worship]

- "If you want the Spirit to light a fire in someone, stack up dry kindling and seasoned wood [of catechisms] in his mind, then pray for the divine spark. Tracts may introduce the gospel, but a catechism puts truth into a context in which words like *God*, *sin*, and *salvation* make sense." (86)
- "Theology reflected in the confessional unity of the church helps us to see the big picture so that we know how to fit individual parts of Scripture together, just as the picture on a box helps us to know how to put together the individual pieces of a jigsaw puzzle." (87)
- "It is unnecessary and often dangerous to reinvent the wheel in writing our own theology." (88)
- "Many a heresy has risen from a lack of balance in the approach to truth." (89)
- "Learning from the great writers of the past will show that we are wise to listen to God's best messengers. Charles Spurgeon said, 'He who will not use the thoughts of other men's brains, proves that he has no brains of his own.'" (91)
- "On the battlefield of life and ministry, nothing is more worthwhile than clarity." (92) [Creeds and confessions are used to clarify the main teachings of Scripture.]

Heed also these words by James Benjamin Green, in his work, *A Harmony of the Westminster Presbyterian Standards: With Explanatory Notes*:

- "... why study them? ... First, because they are important historic documents. They belong to the literature of Christianity. They arose out of the life of the Church, and have profoundly affected the course and character of that life. Is a man interested in history? Does he find value in the records of the past? Then the Standards have a claim on his attention ... No right-thinking person wishes to break with the past."
- "... in the second place, ... they have present-day value. They contain a system of doctrine, a creed ... If the Church would edify her people, unify and mobilize them, she must educate them after a thorough manner in her creed."
- "To say of a man that he has no creed is tantamount to saying that he has no intelligence and no character."

Let me ask you whether you think to be a member of a church that you should have to confess that you believe in the Trinity. If so, it is important to recognize that the word "Trinity" does not appear in Scripture. The word "Trinity" and the careful phrases used to correctly express the Bible's revealed doctrine about the Triune God (three persons, one substance) were deduced and developed by Tertullian in the second century and used by later church councils against heresies; they naturally developed into formally written creeds to draw the line of orthodoxy and protect the saints. The Reformed confessions simply reflect all of that important work. Many people say that they believe the Bible yet deny the biblical doctrine of the Trinity to which I trust you believe is vital for elders to subscribe and uphold with members who commit to believe in mutual vows to an agreed upon expression of faith and practice: our *Westminster Confession*. Simply to say we only have the Bible does not qualify what we believe the Bible teaches, and in a day that has groups masquerading as churches built on millennia of heresies, so we need the creeds built on millennia of Church Courts tearing them down in writing by clarifying what the Bible in fact teaches (and is thus required of pastors to teach and Christians to believe and do).

But the point is this: if you say you believe the "Trinity", you may not realize it, but you are borrowing from Christian creeds to do so. Carl Trueman aptly puts it this way:

... even those churches and Christians who repudiate the whole notion of creeds and confessions will yet tend to operate with an implicit creed. ... 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. ... all Christians engage in confessional synthesis; the difference is simply whether one adheres to a public confession, subject to public scrutiny, or to a private confession that is, by its very nature, immune to such examination. ... Anyone today who rejects the usefulness of creeds and yet articulates an understanding of God that uses terms such as 'substance' is clearly indebted to traditions of theological discussion that are directly rooted in the creedal debates and definitions of the early church. ... theology cannot simply be done by reading the Bible: the fine-tuning of concepts and vocabulary is a cumulative and traditionary exercise. ... the more one acknowledges the traditions upon which he depends for his theology, the more he is actually able to assess them in the light of Scripture.

Frankly, to dismiss confessions and not subscribe to one formally in a church is stubborn rebellion. It is an arrogant refusal to submit to church authorities and be ruled by them according to the Scriptures on behalf of King Jesus (Hebrews 13:7, 17). It makes oneself his own Pope of his own Vatican distanced from Christ's reign and reality. Trueman continues:

... do not precipitately abandon creedal formulations which have been tried and tested over centuries by churches all over the world in favor of your own ideas. On the whole, those who reinvent the wheel invest a lot of time either to come up with something that looks identical to the old design or something that is actually inferior to it. ...The Lord has graciously provided us with a great cloud of witnesses throughout history who can help us to understand the Bible and to apply it to our present day. To ignore such might not be so much a sign of biblical humility as of overbearing hubris and confidence in our own abilities and the uniqueness of our own age. ...we should be less confident of our judgment and more inclined to trust the church, an attitude which clearly goes against our current cultural predilection to suspicion and iconoclasm. ...Those of us in the West have been taught to believe so deeply in the authority and autonomy of the individual that subjecting our own thoughts to external authorities, especially corporate or historic, is very counterintuitive. Combined with a desire for instant gratification, many of us are inclined to believe that if something does not make sense the first time we look at it, it—and not we—must be wrong. That is not the way the church operates. ...Paul has a high view of the church as a body and as an institution. ...That society tells us to distrust authority, to doubt all leaders, and to dismiss the past is of little relevance to applying biblical principles to our churches.

Here is what I submit to you is behind most anti-confessionalism: human nature's corrupt insistence on self-rule enabled by an American psyche that begins and ends with an independent streak expressed in mottos such as "Don't Tread on Me". Upon my prodding at an "until I see it" blindness, some have admitted to me they have a default disposition of distrusting tradition and historical documents. Trueman has his thumb on this anti-authority pulse:

... if anything marks the contemporary world it is surely suspicion of external authority [which he later qualifies as rejection of *traditional forms* of external authority]. One might generalize and say that the issues noted above [as main cultural cases against creeds and confessions], with science, technology, consumerism, language, mysticism, and pragmatism, are all variations on the theme of rejection of external authority, that of the past in the case of science and technology, and that of anything but the self in terms of consumerism, language, and the rest ...Creeds strike hard at the cherished notion of human autonomy and of the notion that I am exceptional, that the normal rules do not apply to me in the way they do to others. ...a common confession in a creed is a good thing: it makes the point that my faith is the faith of the other people in the church—both today and throughout the ages ... the great creeds of the church are corporate products which have been tried and tested by the church across the world and down through the centuries. They carry the authority of the ages behind them."

Even more specific to rejecting authority, here is the real rub: "...confessionalism is not simply about abstract doctrine; confessions also bind one to certain practices, certain ways of life." The head of the nail is hammered. Most who come to us like our theology, and maybe our lifestyle in theory—but in the end many do not actually intend to live it in practice; most notably, they buck at being expected to sanctify the Lord's Day by showing up for worship and sharing in fellowship with the rest of Christ's body (as if one could live Christianity alone on one's own terms).

For Christ and His Kingdom,

Pastor Grant

P.S.: Some books you might find helpful for personal study are: *Why Do We Have Creeds?* By Burk Parsons, and *The Creedal Imperative* by Carl R. Trueman, both available via Ligonier Ministries. I have quoted extensively from Trueman's work here, and it should be noted that I have interspersed his words in topical sections of my letter and not provided page references for readability; I believe I have not misrepresented him by such topical collection, and encourage you to read the book entirely for yourself (in fact, I want you to check my use of his words in context).

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