

—The Creedal Imperative—

The importance of Creeds and Confessions for maintaining the unity and purity of the visible Church *Lesson 2*

- 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. 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 Usefulness of Creeds and Confessions
 - A. Confessions limit the power of the church over the consciences of the people.
 1. Adopted confessions describe the message which the church is to preach and limit the church's power to what's contained in 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 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*.
 - c) A minister with "no creed but the Bible" once said he was "neither a Calvinist nor an Arminian but preached every text on its own terms." *What's wrong with that?*
 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 relation to each other.
 - a) A confession states clearly what a church stands for and thus allows the people to know what to expect from the eldership and, most importantly, when the eldership is overstepping its bounds in its doctrinal assertions, requirements, or expectations.
 - B. Creeds and confessions offer succinct and thorough summaries of the faith.
 1. They 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 ably address the essentials 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'll stay focused on the great theological categories that touch on matters of eternal significance.
 2. Creeds and confessions cover the basic topics of Christian doctrine to protect the church and its leaders from making their own issues *the* issues.
 - a) If we're tempted to think these confessions are 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 consistent orthodox witness, a certain level of complexity is necessary in its 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) In order for a confession to be succinct its statements require a certain amount of complexity that assumes and requires the parameters and influence of its broader doctrinal matrix. Every

confessional statement is a statement in context to be interpreted in context—in the context of the confession itself, which is then to be considered in the context of Scripture.

- C. Creeds and confessions allow for appropriate discrimination between members and office-bearers.
1. Typically, Presbyterians set the bar for full communicant membership very low. A simple but biblical profession of faith along the lines of Rom 10.9-10 is sufficient, i.e., a basic trust in Christ and an outward profession that's consistent with that.
 - a) Of course, this profession is fleshed out in a series of vows on essential issues such as the authority of the Bible, the Trinity and incarnation, salvation by grace through faith in Christ, a commitment to follow Christ in a life of obedience, and submission to elder oversight, but the overall content is simple and straightforward.
 - b) The finer details of the doctrines of the faith are the things that the church is to teach her members, not the things required of them before entry. Membership is not a reward for achieving a high level of doctrinal knowledge any more than a high level of personal holiness. It's the gateway to the ordinary means of grace by which maturity is possible.
 - c) *What's wrong with requiring members to hold a particular view of the end-times or a particular stance on the use of alcohol?*
 2. Nevertheless, the Bible makes it clear that qualifications for office-bearing are set higher, 1Tim 1.1-7; Tit 1.9-11.
 - a) An elder is to have the maturity and discernment to know what he's to focus on in terms of his teaching and the knowledge to be able to do that effectively. He's also to make sure that his ambition is not to be a teacher. His task is to draw attention to the teaching not to himself.
 - b) So it's clear Paul assumes the teacher is to have a certain doctrinal competence which typically doesn't mark the church member because a non-negotiable qualification of an elder is that he's to be able to teach, 1Tim 3.1-7.
 - c) The question of a denomination and church, then, is *what is it* that the elders are to be competent to teach? *What content is it* that they're supposed to have sufficiently grasped in order to hold the office of elder? *What more do they need to know* than a new Christian who just joined the church? Creeds and confessions provide an answer to these questions.
 3. It's important to understand here that this is not to say that a simple faith is insufficient for salvation. It's to say that a simple faith is insufficient for the establishment and well-being of the church as a Christian community. The church is a place where infants grow into adults, where novices in the faith grow into elders in the faith, where one goes from the elementary things of God to the deep things of God, and from a basic knowledge of the gospel and a desire for holiness to a mature knowledge of the gospel and a consistent pursuit of holiness.
 - a) Requiring elders to have a proficient knowledge of the church's doctrinal positions as expressed in its creeds and confessions is a means of ensuring that they have the knowledge and ability to foster growth among the congregation.
 - b) Requiring elders to subscribe to the church's doctrinal standards provides a way to hold them accountable for what they believe and teach as elders in the church, and also allows for setting an appropriately different level for members. It recognizes the seriousness of the office of elder and also the fact that many genuine believers have a minimal understanding of the faith at their conversion.
- D. Creeds and confessions reflect the ministerial authority of the church.
1. One of the most important aspects of creeds and confessions is that they're corporate documents authored and owned by the corporate church, as represented by her office-bearers.
 2. And because these documents have been adopted by those called to hold office in Christ's church, the default position of the church should be one of trust and obedience toward them.
 3. This doesn't mean we shouldn't search the Scriptures to see if these things are so, Acts 17.11-12. But it does mean we should be less confident in our private judgment and more inclined to trust the church's office-bearers called by God to help and lead us into maturity.

4. Society tells us to distrust traditional authority, doubt all leaders, and dismiss the past; but this is not the New Testament's view of the church and its place in our lives.
- E. Creeds and confessions represent the maximum doctrinal competence that can be expected from a congregation.
1. For a church to hold to a creed or confession and to require subscription to it from its office-bearers is to send a signal to the congregation about what the church considers to be important in her doctrinal life. That is to say, the church's creeds represent its doctrinal aspirations for its members, which is why confessional churches typically have at least one catechism among its standards that it seeks to use as a pedagogical tool to teach its members the faith.
 2. We want church membership to be as inclusive as the Bible makes it, but we don't want to send a signal that members should be satisfied with an elementary understanding of Christianity—especially since the Bible itself sets an ambitious standard for doctrinal understanding and expects growth in such understanding to be a normal result of belonging to the church. Membership is the beginning, not the end, of the pedagogical process, Heb 5.11-6.3.
 3. As the confession sets out what the church considers to be vital as well as the parameters of the church's pedagogical power, it also represents the maximum that can be officially expected of church members as they grow and mature.
 4. In this context, a good confession becomes, not an overbearing rule, but an exciting map of the territory of biblical truth that can be expected from the church's ministry and something to which to aspire as a church member.
- F. Creeds and confessions relativize the present.
1. Creeds and confessions that have proved useful over the centuries are immune to the passing fads and tastes of the present. They speak to issues which the church has found important for generations.
 2. If we find ourselves faced with new concerns which the confession doesn't fully address, we need to remember that confessions are *normed Norms* and always subject to correction and revision by the *norming Norm* of Scripture. If a confession is found to be inadequate, however, the inadequacy is with the confession, not Scripture. God's Word has been given to God's Church with an eye to *all* she'll need for all the ages of her sojourn. There is not and nor will there ever be a contemporary concern that God hasn't taken into account in His revelation.
 3. Also, the advantage of creeds and confessions is that they are profoundly countercultural in a biblical way. By reciting a creed in the worship service or adhering to an historic confession as part of the church's identity, the church makes a powerful statement of her relationship to the contemporary culture. *The present* is where we live and breathe but the creeds and confessions of the church connect us to *the past* and indicate to us and to the world that our identity is rooted in *the past*, in what God has done in Christ for us.
 4. To subscribe to and adopt a confession is to say that the church is bigger than our day and generation. Its foundation lies in the past. We're charged with stewarding that truth in our current context, but that truth neither begins nor ends with us. This kind of counterculturalism is important. Truth is not relative and doesn't need to be modified to be relevant. It's absolute and therefore transcends all the shifting sands of the cultures of the ages.
- G. Creeds and confessions help to define one church in relation to another.
1. It serves transparency because it allows those outside to see what a particular church represents and advocates before they visit it.
 2. When visitors come to the church and they can be pointed to a succinct summary of the church's position on key doctrinal points, it's convenient, honest, and transparent. It leaves nobody in any doubt what the church is and what it teaches.
- H. Creeds and confessions are necessary for maintaining corporate unity.
1. Some will not belong to the church or be welcome to join the church because they do not believe. Creeds and confessions establish boundaries of belonging, and by implication, of exclusion. Both are necessary if the church is to have a meaningful corporate identity and unity.