

The Need for Creeds and Confessions

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IT IS a constant lament that biblical standards are loosely kept or even forsaken by Christian believers. Such a situation is not unique to the present day. Over the centuries the battle for truth has been fought, and although there have been triumphs, defeats have also abounded. Reformed churches have historically resorted to the use of Creeds and Confessions in all their contendings for Gospel truth.

A Definition

What are Creeds and Confessions? At their simplest, they are statements of the Bible's great doctrines and a list of its leading precepts. We can further add this: they are summaries and presentations of Gospel truth. Creeds and Confessions have been formulated throughout the life of the Church. See for example, "Jesus is Lord;" cf. Matthew 16:16 and 1 Corinthians 12:3. Later generations produced the Apostles' Creed, the Athanasian and Nicene Creeds, through to the great Reformation and Protestant Confessions. This leads to an all-important question:

Why have Creeds and Confessions?

1. They are the Means of Establishing Orthodoxy.

In other words, they are the means of testing a man's soundness in the faith. As hinted at above, history teaches us that tests of orthodoxy are a necessity. Heresies arose in Apostolic days. Great light and truth, attended by signs and wonders, had broken out, yet it was vital to "hold fast the form of sound words" (2 Timothy 1:13). If it mattered then, how much more today. The Reformation saw a pouring forth of Protestant Creeds and Confessions. Men clung to them, in some instances to the death. Such were needed, then, in better days. Do we not require them still in a time of terrible and unheard-of declension? How else are we to "try the spirits whether they are of God" (1 John 4:1)?

2. They are a Means of Safeguarding Truth.

As statements and summaries of the vital doctrines of the Bible, they take on the role of a guardian or protector. To explain, let us use the example of a farmer. He places cattle in a field and if he is experienced, he will know that the animals will always find a way of escaping, especially if they are sheep! This does not prevent him from placing a fence around the field in order to keep the wayward creatures in. Indeed, he makes the land as secure as possible. So too with Creeds and Confessions. Sinful nature is prone to wander, yet a Creed can be like a fence, helping to keep us in the 'field' of the Gospel.

3. They are a Means of Witnessing to the Truth.

The Apostle Paul describes the church as "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). By this, we understand that God's Word has been entrusted to us. We are to guard it carefully and give a clear witness to all its precepts. In adopting a Creed, we formally and openly declare our belief in Scripture and a clear demarcation is drawn between the believing and the unbelieving.

4. They are a Means of Promoting Harmony and Peace.

The Scriptures command us to think, believe and speak the same things. See for example, 1 Corinthians 1:10. How can this be achieved? Two cannot walk together unless they be agreed and agreement cannot be obtained unless there is a common acceptance of a statement of holy Scripture. It is at this point that Creeds and Confessions are a great help.

5. They are a Means of Distinguishing between Christians.

This was especially true amongst the different Protestant denominations of past years and still ought to be the case. Creeds are an honest attempt to let others know what we believe. We say 'honest', because it is honourable to be open with each other, especially when a believer may consider joining with a company of God's people. Besides, they can be a help in allowing Christians from different denominations to understand and fellowship with one another, even if they do not always agree on every point.

6. They are also a Means of Study.

The reading of Creeds, Confessions and Catechisms has done much good down the centuries. Modern believers who neglect them, do so to their own detriment. A regular perusal of a Creed's contents will stimulate study, inspire faith and keep the Reformed doctrines alive in believers' hearts.

7. They are a Means of Exhortation.

Following on closely from the above, Creeds can challenge, rebuke, instruct and draw us closer to the Lord. Left to ourselves, we can grow spiritually lax, but as the Apostle Peter tells us, we need stirring up by being reminded of biblical truth (2 Peter 1:13). To this end, we recommend the reading of the Westminster documents every year or two. In this way, they will remain fresh in our hearts and minds.

8. They are the Means of Last Resort.

In other words, in cases of serious discipline they can be employed as a standard by which to act and judge. By way of example, when a minister begins to teach heretical doctrines, Creeds and Confessions are there to hopefully recall him to better things. If this fails, then the same Creeds can be used to dismiss him from the sacred office. We are mindful that it depends upon the godliness of his fellow ministers and elders as to whether matters are administered correctly or not. All the same, the Creeds are essential to this whole process.

The present age is one of spiritual vagueness, subjectivity and the assumption of a form of godliness, "but denying the power thereof." Creeds and Confessions can be something of a help in delivering the Church from these evils. Yet Creeds have their detractors, even from within denominations which have historically required subscription to such documents. What are their objections? Let us consider some and endeavour to give answers to them:

Objections

1. Creeds are put in the place of the Bible.

Therefore, Scripture is all that we need. This objection proceeds from a mistaken assumption. No true believer has ever believed that his Creed is equal with, or even supersedes, Scripture. The compilers of the Westminster Confession of Faith could write concerning the books of the Bible: "All which are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life" (Chapter 1: section ii). Section iv adds: "The authority of the holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God, (who is truth itself) the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God." Thus the supremacy and authority of holy Scripture over any other writings is asserted. Creeds then, are only human statements and summaries of faith. As such, they are not infallible, but standards which are subordinate to the Word of God.

This objection has another mistaken assumption. It argues that the Bible is all we need. To a great degree that is true, but in another sense it is not. God gave permanent gifts to his Church of pastors and teachers. If the Bible is all we need, why did God provide us with such standing ministries? Preaching is necessary, because the Holy Spirit uses this ordinance to grant understanding of the Word to the Church. Rejection of Creeds must also mean a rejection of preaching, for both exist for the same end. Lovers of Creeds do not esteem the Bible less, but instead, love and honour it more. Centuries of Reformed history testify to this.

2. Creeds are not found in the Bible.

Evidences of creeds do exist in the New Testament. See: Matthew 16: 16; 1 Corinthians 12:3; 1 Timothy 6:12 & 13; 2 Timothy 1:13; 3:14 and Matthew 28:19 & 20. The origins of the Apostles' Creed may be open to conjecture. It is clear, however, that its roots were certainly 'Apostolic', for the churches of Tertullian's day (born c.150 A.D.) accepted this as being so.

3. Creeds make the Christian Faith complicated.

The Christian faith is simple, it is said, but Creeds fill it with complexities. To this we can answer that the basic precepts of the Gospel may be simple. 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 lays the fundamentals before us: Christ died for our sins; was buried; and rose again the third day. If these were the whole contents of Christianity, then critics might have a significant point in their favour; but the opposite is the case. The Bible contains some things hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16) and this has caused individuals and churches to founder spiritually and fall into terrible error and heresy. If anything, Creeds help to explain the Bible's teaching and keep us on an orthodox path. To have a humble spirit and to regard Creeds and Confessions as teaching documents is surely a significant mark of grace.

4. Creeds are a straightjacket.

They hinder the development of further truth and light, and confine freedom of thought. Such an objection depends upon the presuppositions of the critic. If he believes that God has NOT confined his Word to the books of the Old and New Testaments, then Creeds will be obnoxious to him. If, however, he accepts the Bible's view of itself that it is God's ONLY Word to man, then he will be glad of any statement and summary of belief that strengthens faith. The doctrines of the Bible are not changeable. They are derived from God's holy, inspired Scriptures of Truth and, as such, are his final, sufficient and unchangeable revelation to us. The problem is, man is forever changing, especially in matters of doctrine and spirituality. On the contrary, orthodox belief seeks to be settled and grounded in the Truth and will use Creeds to maintain this. Indeed, faithful ministers will strive not to preach anything original. Only those things found in the Bible and summarised in the Creeds will fill their pulpit utterances. When a man is about to enter the ministerial office, he ought to know what he believes before he commits himself. He is not setting out to some unknown destination and lost before he starts. Rather, he takes up God's chart and compass and leads his people in the right way. Creeds are an indispensable aid in accomplishing this.

5. Creeds are a cause of contention and disunity.

It is not to be denied that certain individuals can use good things to serve an evil cause, but that is not to make a good thing bad. Creeds by their nature cannot cause discord. If anything, they are the means of obtaining oneness and peace, for a company of God's people united upon these principles will experience great harmony. Even so, the opponents of Creeds may persist in their objection. What can we further answer? Should Creeds seem to be the unlikely cause of division, they are still not to be blamed. Christ made it clear that his coming would not bring harmony, but division. See Luke 12:49-53. The Gospel always brings about opposition and even violent persecution. Is it at fault? Of course not! When a believer contends for the truth, as instructed by Scripture, is he to be condemned? A thousand times NO! The fault lies with those who resist the truth and will have none of it. Creeds, then, are blameless. So also are those who defend their use. Although we are to live at peace with all men, this will not always be possible because of error and wickedness in their hearts.

6. Creeds affect the rights of private judgment and conscience.

They are dictatorial and have no right to tell us what to believe. This objection makes a wrong assumption. Creeds are NOT dictatorial. No one is compelled to accept them, therefore the conscience is not violated in any way, or the rights of private judgment curtailed. Whenever a group of believers choose to unite and walk together, they will sooner or later agree upon a basis for this union. Every church must have one, for it is impossible to function otherwise. Such an agreement and the acceptance of this basis is voluntary. We repeat: no one is forced to submit to it against his wishes. Therefore, this objection cannot stand.

7. Creeds are old-fashioned.

We understand more today, so they are not necessary. This objection reveals conceit and also ignorance of history. To think that we know it all is in fact to be blind to our true state. A survey of history will tell us that our forefathers knew significantly more of divine truth than we do today. Modern Christians should hang their heads in shame for even thinking up such an objection.

8. Creeds are no guarantee of continued orthodoxy.

To this we agree, but do we abandon all safeguards because of a past disappointing experience? A dog may escape from a garden, but it does not prevent us from constructing a secure fence around our property. This objection, however, is not wholly accurate. Creeds and Confessions have done much to maintain orthodoxy over hundreds of years. Who knows to what depths the churches could have sunk without them? It is significant, that since many believers have refused any or little subscription to Creeds, the Church and nation have gone into spiritual decline.

Are you ashamed of your Creed and Confession? In danger of letting it slip? Wanting a Creed-less (and spine-less) Christianity?

Do not be ashamed! Thank God that they arose in his providence. Gladly affirm your belief in and acceptance of them. Let the world and fellow believers know what we believe. Above all, let them be some of those means whereby we rededicate ourselves to the Lord and his service.

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