

CREEDS IN CRISIS!

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Many are rethinking the confessions of faith. What is the place of the confessions of faith in our Reformed circles? Do they still function? Do the elders and deacons still know what they are doing when they sign the form of subscription? Do the ministers still teach without any reservation the "afore said doctrine"? Are our credal formulations so outdated that they must be scrapped and be replaced with new ones? Should we have credal formulations at all in our ecumenical age? Should creeds be limited to the church "institute" only? These are questions we must face.

Pro and Con Discussion

In The Netherlands there is a lively discussion going on pro and con credal formulations. Dr. C. Augustyn has not much use for the three forms of unity. We cannot do too much with them in our situation.¹ Augustyn cannot accept as valid for our time Answer 80 of our Heidelberg Catechism.² He feels that the three forms of unity contain many unimportant things and also deficiencies. We must speak now about war, peace, hunger, foreign aid. These are the important questions.³

On October 31, 1969, the Reformed Church (Gereformeerde Kerken) Synod gave a mandate to a committee to face the question whether or not the church needs a new confession; and, if so, how the church can formulate one in today's language. Rev. M. P. Van Dyk responded to the mandate with his book *Nieuw Credo. Proeve van een nieuwe belijdenis*.⁴ He opines that the church is able to formulate a new confession and he has drawn up one as an example.

The International Association for Reformed Faith and Action is struggling with the whole question of the creeds and has devoted an issue of its *International Bulletin* to the subject "On Creeds and Making New Ones." The association does not want to limit credal expressions to the institutional church. "Christianity should find just as clear and vigorous confessional expression in free associations as in the institution of worship. In our view the creed of the Christian community cannot be limited to our ecclesiastical institution anymore than religion itself can."⁵ Therefore the two articles: *Confessing the Faith in Labor Relations Today* by Richard Forbes and *Confessing Christ in Education* by James H. Olthuis and Bernard Zylstra.⁶ Dr. Schrotenboer speaks about outdated ecclesiastical confessions. Their emphasis and language are not expressive and useful enough for the needs we have in our age. The creeds are more salvation-than-service centered. They over emphasize the vertical and neglect the horizontal approach.⁷

Present Theological Climate

Is the present theological climate healthy enough to be able to deal with the reformation of creeds? I have my problems here. We live in a crisis period of faith. Dr. Nugent describes our age as a twentieth-century "Renaissance."⁸ Everywhere there is a profound religious ferment and a widespread urge to get behind history to utopias, first principles, and primitive constitutions."⁹

It strikes me that, precisely in our age, we have so much credal ferment. In 1969, a profound study by Canon and Vice-Dean of Worcester appeared. Canon Armstrong proposed in his study *Creeds and Credibility*: "This is written for the many intelligent churchmen and churchwomen of today who have serious intellectual difficulties in accepting the creeds of orthodoxy in their literal meaning, while personally desiring the commitment of faith. They find a certain insincerity in asserting credal beliefs simply as matters of faith without intellectual conviction of their truth; and in some cases the feeling is so strong that sincerity is preferred to adherence. For their comfort this book is written. Its thesis is briefly that God's revelation of himself has been progressive in history; that man's understanding of it has always been expressed through the thought-background of the ages in which it was received. That therefore, because the revelation has been historical, a certain divergence has grown between the truth as intellectually understood at various periods and the symbolic 'schemata' into which they were translated for the religious of the day.... The aim of this work is not to convince unbelievers, but to present the Christian faith in a form in which it can be firmly held by those who are perturbed and shaken by recent doubts and speculations."¹⁰ The reader is not left without doubt about the theology of the Canon.

Overture to CRC Synod

The coming Synod of the Christian Reformed Church will have to deal with the question of credal reformulation. Classis Chatham adopted an overture of Wallaceburg which reads: "Classis Chatham requests Synod to declare that it is necessary and desirable to re-express the faith of the church in a new confession which will replace the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort as a statement of the truth and as our standard of unity."¹¹

Classis Chatham wants to make it abundantly clear that this overture is "in no wise to be construed as either an acknowledgement that the Three Forms of Unity are not in harmony with the Word of God, or a weakening of their binding character."¹² I appreciate this sentiment. However, I believe that we are going in the wrong direction if we replace the standards of unity with a new creed.

What is a creed?

What do we do when we confess our faith credally? Creeds lead the people of God to His Word. They express the doctrines of the Word. Therefore, they confess the Word but do not exhaust it.¹³

Dr. Herman Ridderbos says: "The word that the New Testament uses for confession is *homologeîn*: to say the same thing, to say after, to agree with that which is spoken beforehand. That which was spoken beforehand is in its deepest dimension not the word of the church but the word or revelation, the Word of God."¹⁴

Unfortunately, many identify fidelity to the creeds with narrow-mindedness, limiting intellectual freedom, and stifling theological research. How can this be when the creeds say the same thing as Scripture? Dr. Klaas Runia says, and rightly so, that the confession of the church is a doxology, a declaration of love.

In the creeds, the believers confess openly that they love God for what He is, has done and is doing in the mighty works of creation and redemption.¹⁵ Therefore, our creeds are not theological treatises. Theology is a science. But our confessions are our heart response to the Scriptures. Our theology arises out of our earnest dealings with Scripture and creeds.

Scripture and Creed

What is the relationship between creed and the Word of God? Are creeds and Scripture identical? They are not. However, our creeds are thoroughly grounded in Scripture. Our confessions are not identical with the Word of God. The creeds themselves confess this (cf. Articles 3, 5 and 7 of our Belgic Confession).¹⁶

When our fathers formed the creeds they used the Word of God and that Word alone. You need only some elementary knowledge of our three forms of unity to know that they are a result of a thorough study of the Scriptures.¹⁷ In her creeds the church expresses her response to God, who reveals His truth to her.¹⁸ Through her creeds, the church testifies to the Truth. Through them, the church says: "Look! This is what we believe! This is in a nutshell the message we have for our world."

I want to mention also the beautiful way our creeds express the unity of God's Word.¹⁹ This prevents Biblicism and a setting of one truth over against the other. This restrains individual church members from using Scripture for their own theological hobby horses. Through the confessions the church says: "Listen! This is the way we ought to go." And the church can do this because she is "the pillar and the ground of the truth."²⁰

Are we not overestimating the creeds? We are not. As a matter of fact, in our historical situation, I wish we had greater appreciation for the creeds. We do not have an idolatrous attitude toward them. This happens only if we use the creeds over and above the Word of God. Even our response to Scripture is human. Therefore, our confessions are human and fallible. We confess our faith credally because we realize that the creeds testify to the Truth of God's Word.²¹ In her confessions the church can err. Therefore she always stands corrected by the Word.²² And because the creeds are grounded in the Bible and testify to the Word, they are binding for the church.²³

The Holy Spirit and the Creeds

A confessing church depends on the Holy Spirit. When the church confesses in her creeds the truth of God's Word, she believes she has the Holy Spirit. A confession or creed is the fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit, Who is the great Teacher of the Church. "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God" (I Cor. 2:12). "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (I Cor. 12:3). The Spirit and the Scripture are one. The Bible is inspired through the Holy Spirit and it is a channel through which the Spirit teaches the church of all ages.²⁴

The church has always wanted to express her faith in a confession. In New Testament times, you find but simple expressions of what lived in the hearts. The confessions did not keep their simplicity. Already in her infant stage, the New Testament Church had to battle the spirit of her age. The apostles testify to this. Just take the example of John who wrote: "For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist" (II John 7). Paul wrote to Timothy: "Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus" (II Tim. 1:13). Jude exhorts his readers to defend the faith (Jude 3). The early church, despite her shortcomings and failures, had to address herself to heresies. And she spoke unequivocally, through the Spirit and the Word, and confessed in detail her faith in the Christ of the Scriptures.²⁵

The church of the Reformation confessed her faith clearly in order to expose the errors of the church of Rome and to instruct the people of God in the Biblical truth. In the seventeenth century, the church of the Reformation was forced to combat the errors of Arminianism and eloquently confessed her faith in the Sovereignty of God and the gracious truth of election.

But if we recognize the leading of the Holy Spirit in the formulating of the confessions don't we then say, after all, that the creeds are infallible and on the same par as Scriptures?" Again, I say we do not, The norm for our faith is the Holy Bible. The confessions have *derived* authority. Their authority lies in the fact that the church believes them to be in agreement with Scriptures.²⁷ The confessions are grounded in Scripture, and we are not allowed to add to Scripture.

This does not mean that we may not add to our present creeds. The church is always in a historical situation. New heresies arise and must be dealt with. The church must always speak to the problems of her age. Dr. Abraham Kuyper taught that a confessing church is not a stagnant church. Under certain circumstances we must confess more than the church of the past.²⁸

The Historical Continuity of the Creeds

Every confession has its own date and background. But "it is an undeniable fact that every confession pretends to proclaim abiding truth."²⁹ If the confessions say the same thing as the Word of God, I cannot see the need for a new confession. We may

update the language of our creeds, but we should not do away with them. We must not break the historical continuity of the church.

Our age is a rather arrogant one. We have little appreciation for the past. Many seem to think that the Holy Spirit speaks only today. What Scripture taught in the seventeenth century, it still teaches today. The Word of God spoke to our forefathers and speaks to us now. There is a strong inclination presently to break away from all traditions. But we are not new on the scene! We are not the first ones who studied the Scriptures earnestly. It is arrogant to think that the Holy Spirit is only now beginning to give insight into ageless truth.³⁰ Scripture and the Spirit present in the fourth and sixteenth centuries are with us today also. The Truth the church confesses is ageless. We may receive deeper insights into the Truth, but the basic Truth remains.

We should perhaps speak to the errors of our day credally, though theological errors have a way of repeating themselves. We could augment the creeds by taking into account the current departures from the faith.³¹ We can do this, but we can never break with the past. We always confess the faith in historical continuity, while speaking to and not submitting to every theological or philosophical fad of our age in ferment. This alone is Reformed.³²

Creeds and Ecumenicity

A reformulation of the creeds? New creeds? I say NO! We have the three forms of unity. These are ecumenical confessions. For example, through our creeds we have much in common with the Canadian Reformed Church. True ecumenicity was experienced when church leaders from all over gathered at Dort. "Give us the Reformed ecumenicity of the Dort Fathers!"³³ We must seek ecumenical relationships on the basis of our confession, on what basically unites us.³⁴ This is Biblical ecumenicity.

Let us hold on to our creeds. Let us study them. There is a lack of reading and Bible study also among our elders and deacons. Let us all struggle with the creeds as each generation has done. Let us through study make the confessions our very own.

Should we add to the creeds? Perhaps we should wrestle together with the nature and authority of Scripture in the light of our tragic modern developments. Perhaps we should say something about eschatology in the light of modern dispensationalism, realized eschatology, and so forth. Perhaps, we should say something more about the Lordship of Christ in every area of life. However, a church must be careful not to speak confessionally about every conceivable and inconceivable subject.³⁵

We will be faced with the question of reformulating the creeds. Should we have a new one? I hope and pray that our Synod will say "No." Dr. Louis Praamsma's observation is so very true: "The uniqueness of this event-character of the confession proves itself in the fact that a church cannot make a confession as it makes a set of rules for any

occasion or committee; it cannot at any given time convene a Synod or Council charging it with the drafting of a confession – in our own century the wish has often been expressed to have a new confession: but, apart from the Barmen theses which rose to a historical state of emergency, no confession was drafted of a classic character." ³⁶

It is not popular nowadays to glory in the past. Yet, I do. We have a great heritage, which must be kept not for tradition's sake but because it has its roots firmly planted in the historic church which is "the pillar and the ground of the truth."

"Glorious is the heritage of the Reformed Faith. God grant that it may go forth to new triumphs even in the present time of unbelief." ³⁷

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