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**CREEDS:
CONFESSIONS
OF FAITH IN THE
LIFE OF THE
CHURCH**

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CREEDS: CONFESSIONS OF FAITH IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

Sitting in our faculty meeting a few days ago, I listened with interest as our Dean, Dr. Clint Arnold, discussed a recently administered survey of our students that asked them to give the reasons they chose Talbot School of Theology as their place of study. While students offered a variety of reasons, such as Talbot's academic standards and practical orientation toward ministerial training, the answers adorning the top of the list all had to do with Talbot's commitment to the Bible as God's word and its centrality in all that we do and teach. I was heartened to note how much our students place a premium on this, for if we do not give Scripture its rightful place in regulating all our teaching and practice, our students and the churches in which they function as leaders will not flourish as God has intended. It appears to me that our students have their priorities straight.

CREEDS

CONFESSIONS

OF FAITH

IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

And so, Scripture needs to be preeminent. But at the same time, Biola University has a statement of faith, to which all faculty must give assent.¹ This is the same statement of faith that has been part of Biola’s history since its inception. In my years of teaching in academic settings as well as in the church, I have encountered more than a few individuals who have questioned whether there is an inherent contradiction between an institution (such as Biola) or a church or denomination claiming, on the one hand, to believe in the sole authority of Scripture, but then, on the other, appealing to an institutionally written statement of faith that does, in fact, regulate the belief and practice of the community. Granting that doctrinal statements such as Biola’s are not themselves the inspired, inerrant Word of God, what role, if any, should such statements have in the life of the church or of parachurch institutions called alongside the church to serve its needs?

CONFESSIONS OF FAITH AS FOUND IN SCRIPTURE ITSELF

It is worth noting that, although the Bible itself is not, strictly speaking, a “confession of faith” in the sense that we are discussing it here, one can find confessions of faith within its pages.

In the Old Testament, the ancient Israelites declared their belief in one, true and living God against the false gods of heathendom in the “Shema”: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One!” Similarly, in the New Testament we see clearly confessions of faith, albeit on a simple level. Philip Schaff cites a number of such instances, such as Peter’s confession of Christ, in which he declares, “Thou art the Christ, the

Son of the Living God.” Some commentators have even suggested that in Jesus’ response to this confession, the “rock” on which Jesus says he will build his church is Peter’s confession rather than Peter himself. Also, the Bible stresses the importance of confessing our faith before others when it states in Romans 10:9-10, “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you shall be saved.”² Likewise, John Leith points to the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:36-38 as “one of the oldest confessions of the Church,” in which he declares his faith by saying, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”³

I therefore believe that Philip Schaff is correct when he states, “Where there is faith, there is also profession of faith. As ‘faith without works is dead,’ so it may be said also that faith without confession is dead.”⁴ Or, as Schaff points out, we may derive this same idea from Christ himself if we recall his words in Matt. 10:32-33, in which he states that if we confess him before men he will confess us before his Father who is in heaven.

THE NECESSITY AND INEVITABILITY OF CONFESSIONS OF FAITH

Now, even if the Bible did not provide us with illustrations of confessions of faith, I believe that creeds would arise necessarily. As history has shown, practical exigencies require the development of statements of doctrine in the life of the church. Some of these factors might be considered “negative,” such as the need to combat heresy, while others reasons might be more “positive,” such as the necessity of regulating the ordination of clergy and for training of new converts in the faith.

“Now, even if the Bible did not provide us with illustrations of confessions of faith, I believe that creeds would arise necessarily.”

The Rise of Creeds to Counteract Heresy

Scripture itself warns us that doctrinal disagreements within the church are inevitable (1 Cor. 11:19). Not all people will agree with the proper interpretation of God’s word, sometimes even on very important points. Now, I realize that some groups eschew creeds, claiming that they have “no creed but the Bible.” This may sound pious, but it only works as long as there is agreement within the community about what the Bible *means* on any given point.⁵ But when there is disagreement on Scripture’s meaning, particularly on important points of the faith, a church or parachurch organization may find it incumbent to draw a line in the sand, as it were, and forbid deviant teaching from continuing in their midst. But any time a church or institution draws such a boundary line there is in fact a “creed” underlying it, even if it is unwritten or merely inchoate.

Historically speaking, it is generally true that creeds have arisen during turbulent periods of the church, often in the crucible of controversy. To cite a well-known ancient example, the church crafted the Nicene Creed in specific response to the false teaching of Arius of Alexandria, who denied the true deity of Christ. Athanasius, that great war horse of the faith, understood well the issues at stake. If the Arian view of Christ were to hold sway, the church would be worshipping a mere creature, baptizing in the name of a mere creature, and praying to a mere creature—thus transmuting the Christian faith into just another species of paganism. Indeed, a Jesus who is not God is not a Jesus who is strong to save. He is not a Jesus who has the power to connect us back to God. The Arian Jesus is, in short, “another Jesus,” and the implications that flow from their view yield “another gospel.” And so, the church produced the Nicene Creed, which declared that Jesus is fully God, of the same substance (*homoousios*) as the Father.

Now, one might object, “But why did the church need to produce a *creed* to deal with the Arian heresy? Why didn’t they just quote the Bible? Aren’t the biblical texts that declare Jesus to be “God” (Jn. 1:1) and “the only begotten Son of God” (Jn. 3:16) good enough? Why not just quote those and be done with it?” Well, the church certainly *did* quote the Bible. But so did the Arians! And herein lies the problem: The Arians quoted chapter and verse to “prove” that Jesus was a created being—drawing precisely upon such verses as John 3:16. But according to them, the expression “only begotten” meant “created”—and concluded from this that Jesus is a creature and therefore not God by nature. And as far as Jesus being called “God” in such passages as John 1:1, they claimed to agree with this! But what they *meant* by it is that Jesus did God-like things, such as ruling, reigning, judging, etc. It is no different, they averred, from the Judges of Israel, who similarly were called

“gods” (Ps. 82:6). Certainly they were not “gods” by nature, but they did exercise a certain divinely sanctioned authority, even as Jesus does. So like them, Jesus also can be called “god,” but only in a figurative manner of speaking.

In such a situation it obviously would not do simply for the church to parrot back the same verses to the Arians that the Arians themselves were using and abusing. Rather, it was necessary for the church to say what the Bible *means* when it says that Jesus is “only begotten” (*monogenes*) or that Jesus is “God” (*theos*). And that is exactly what the Nicene Creed does in its affirmation that Jesus is “begotten, not made” and “of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father.” But just as a dictionary cannot define words simply by repeating the very words that it seeks to define, even so, in explaining the *meaning* of the Bible a creed must, by the nature of the case, use words and phraseology that are not found in the Bible itself but that faithfully clarify Scripture’s true sense.

Some “Positive” Uses of Creeds

On a more “positive” note, one of the main uses of creeds historically has been for candidates to express their faith before the believing community of the church. Originally, the so-called *regula fidei* or “rule of faith” was used for just that purpose. The “rule of faith” is more popularly known as the Apostles’ Creed. Typically, it served the function of allowing the candidate to confess his or her faith on the occasion of baptism. The rule of faith provided a stylized way for the new believer to indicate his or her connection with the family of faith as sharing in a common profession.

Yet another positive use of creeds is for the regulation of teachers and clergy in the church, or in an institution such as Biola. Just as the baptismal creed is a way for the congregant to confess his or her alignment with the faith of the entire body, the denominational or institutional confession of faith serves to indicate the compatibility of clergy, teachers, et al. with the faith and theological values of the entity that they would faithfully serve.

THE AUTHORITY OF CREEDS

Granting that doctrinal statements can and in fact *do* serve to regulate the life of the church in such fundamental matters as setting boundaries for doctrinal teaching in the church, as well as for church membership and for the ordination of clergy, we still must address the question of how much authority creeds *ought to* have. Not surprisingly, one discovers a variety of opinions on this.

Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox View of Creeds

In the Roman Catholic view, Scripture and tradition are two sources of authority that cohere. It is the teaching magisterium of the church that interprets this tradition. The tradition includes the infallible pronouncements of the Roman Pontiff and the decisions of the church's councils, including the creeds that result from them. Thus, the creeds are a part of the infallible teaching of the church, irreformable and inerrant, and are equal in authority with the Bible.

The view of Eastern Orthodoxy is fundamentally the same as the Roman Catholic in principle. However, the Orthodox view is a bit more restricted in some ways. They do not hold to the primacy and infallibility of a pope—be it the Roman Bishop or another. Rather, they impute infallibility to a Spirit-led church, but do so in a more limited range of instances than what one finds in Roman Catholicism. For the Orthodox, those parts of the “tradition” that we might call “Tradition” with a capital “T”—about which the church has achieved universal consensus—are “infallible” and have an “abiding and irrevocable authority.”⁶

For Protestants, however, all doctrinal statements have a *relative* authority compared to that of Scripture. Using our own Biola University as an illustration, the Biola Board has articulated the Protestant position well:

Biola holds steadfastly to the Bible as the sole authority in all matters of faith and practice. While certain creeds, councils, and traditions have been helpful in clarifying doctrine, the Bible alone is inspired and, therefore, infallible. All other writings of man—written by individuals or by groups—are liable to err. Holy Scripture alone is the only norm and rule by which all doctrines are to be evaluated and judged.⁷

In other words, all doctrinal statements are to be compared with and measured against the Bible as canon, and are accepted only in so far as they are compatible with it. Though we obviously believe our own doctrinal statement is true—else we would not hold to it or urge others to do so—we nevertheless do not impute infallibility or inspiration to it.

Accordingly, the Protestant creeds often build these very limitations into the creeds themselves. Consider, for instance, the Lutheran *Formula of Concord*. It states:

But the other [Lutheran] symbols and other writings, of which we made mention a little while ago, do not possess the authority of a judge—for this dignity belongs to Holy Scripture alone; but merely give testimony to our religion, and set it forth to show in what manner from time to time the Holy Scriptures have been understood and explained in the Church of God by the doctors who then lived, as respects controverted articles, and by what arguments, dogmas at variance with the Holy Scriptures have been rejected and condemned.⁸

In other words, even if a Protestant wished to absolutize the creed and make its authority precisely coordinate with that of the Bible, the Protestant creeds themselves contain language that subordinates their authority to the Bible. Thus, to put the Protestant confession in the position of an absolute judge would be to self-destruct, logically speaking.

“ all doctrinal statements are to be compared with and measured against the Bible as canon, and are accepted only in so far as they are compatible with it”

THE EXISTENTIAL ASPECTS OF CREEDS

The Vital, Dynamic Quality of Doctrinal Statements

Statements of faith do more than simply convey raw theological data. I believe a statement of faith—at least a good one—reflects, as one author put it, the very lifeblood of its authors. There is an urgency, an intensity about such confessions that arises from the very depths of the soul. The great creeds of the church are not mere products of the brain, however finely honed and carefully nuanced they may be theologically. They are also products of the emotions, of deep religious feeling. They breathe the full piety of their professors. They express vital faith, profound conviction, abiding confidence, and deep commitment. They often exude a spirit of praise and thanksgiving to God. They express the most sublime truths of the mystery of Godliness, which draw the assent of the mind and beckon the love of the heart. As Leith states so well:

The confession of faith is an essential moment in the life of a Christian. In confession the believer speaks out before men and with men the silent thought and affirmation of his heart and mind. He makes outward what is inward. In confession the believer takes his stand, commits his life, declares what he believes to be true, affirms his ultimate loyalty, and defies every false claim upon his life. The confession of faith is the seal of faith and the courage of faith. The confession of faith is never merely a matter of the mind, as important as the mind may be. For the confession commits more than the mind. It commits all of life. It must be affirmed with the whole person. Hence creeds can never be learned simply from books, though this learning is surely important. They must be learned in the midst of a community of worshipping and believing people who share

“The confession of faith is an essential moment in the life of a Christian.”

in a common life of which the creed is a common affirmation. The confession of faith is a living sacrifice when the believer offers by the help of words his whole personality to his Creator.⁹

The Aesthetic Quality of Doctrinal Statements

In light of the foregoing, I feel that we should consider a little-observed aspect of the great statements of faith, namely what I would call their *aesthetic quality*.

If I were to ask you to name some objects of beauty you might most naturally think of paintings or poetry or music. It is doubtful that many people would include theological systems or creeds in that list. Yet, the best creeds are things of beauty. I believe that a study of the creeds is an *aesthetic* experience for those who appreciate the comeliness of truth. Furthermore, I also believe that the beauty of creeds plays an important role in helping them to realize their intended function.

Would you agree that the Truth is beautiful in itself? But the vigorous and stately prose of a well-crafted doctrinal statement sets before us Beauty expressed beautifully. There is a wonderful melding of form and substance. The best creeds deal with the most sublime articles of the faith, and that with the loftiness and grandeur of expression befitting them.

Now, as evangelicals who hold to the reality and importance of propositional revelation, we are especially concerned with a proposition's truth value. But we should also pay attention to our *mode* of expression, so that it is correlative to the majesty of the subject matter. When we deal with the most awe-inspiring refrains of religion we should not clothe them in common garb any more than a bride would present herself to the bridegroom dressed in a burlap sack.

Let me illustrate this with both a non-theological and then a theological example. Consider a statement that read as follows:

It's obvious that all people should have equal rights. After all, they got them from God. These rights are theirs to keep and should not be taken away. Some of these rights include: (1) the right to personal safety; (2) freedom; and (3) to be able to do what gives someone personal fulfillment.

Compare the above with this:

We holds these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

What is the difference? Both express the same basic ideas. But in the latter statement there is a profundity of expression, a dignity of the prose. There is something about the choice of words and the cadences that implant the ideas deeply into the soul, as well-driven nails.

Consider now a creedal example. Listen, for a moment, to the splendor of the Nicene Creed.¹⁰ In fact, I suggest that you read it aloud—as is often done in some churches—so you can better appreciate the beauty of the rhythms and the sublimity of its thoughts:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds. Light from Light, very God from very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man. He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; from thence he shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified; who spoke through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The reason we should value aesthetics in a creed or in theological statement is analogous to why we sing our theology in the form of hymns. Why sing hymns? Why not just recite them? Singing them drives their meaning home into the heart. It penetrates our soul at a much deeper level. The poetry that forms the lyrics of a hymn combines with the music to have a multiplied effect. Obviously God must agree, for the Bible itself contains the book of Psalms, a collection of writings that comprises the most beautiful lyrical poetry set to music ever written. If all God wanted to do was communicate the truth value of propositions to us in their barest form, why did he inspire the writers of Scripture to present his word in *song*, and to express his truth through the manifold and beautiful literary devices of Hebrew poetry? My point is simply this: if God himself thought his truth important enough to present it to us in such comely garb, should we not ourselves take similar care to adorn his truth as we confess it before others?

We should caution, however, that error can also gain potency by being presented in attractive dress. Recall that Arius of Alexandria spread his heresy through poetry and song. (Music ministers take note!) He broadcast his theology far and wide through the “Thalia,” a poem set to music. This should occasion no wonder, for Satan presents himself as an angel of light. Yet, we should not for this reason discount the value of beauty, whether in music or poetry or prose, simply because there are some who would abuse it.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND APPLICATIONS FOR US

Since almost all of you reading this article are in some way connected to the Biola family, I would like to ask you a personal question and I would urge you to reflect upon the answer in the quiet of your own hearts. How do you view Biola's doctrinal statement and the orthodox Protestant theology that it expresses? Have you taken the time to read it, and if so, have you ever pondered it deeply? And assuming you have, I would also like to ask, “How do you *feel* about it”? Do you *love* the truths it expresses? Do you read it and say, “Yes!!! This is what I believe, and I want the whole world to know it!” Are you moved—yes, deeply stirred—when you read these imposing words:

By His death on the cross, the Lord Jesus made a perfect atonement for sin, by which the wrath of God against sinners is appeased and a ground furnished upon which God can deal in mercy with sinners. He redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse in our place. He who Himself was absolutely without sin was made to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. The Lord Jesus is coming again to this earth, personally, bodily and visibly. The return of our Lord is the blessed hope of the believer, and in it God's purposes of grace toward mankind will find their consummation.

Do you burst forth with praise when you confess:

Men are justified on the simple and single ground of the shed blood of Christ and upon the simple and single condition of faith in Him, who shed His blood, and are born again by the quickening, renewing, cleansing work of the Holy Spirit, through the instrumentality of the Word of God.

When you consider our doctrinal statement do you thank God for the godly heritage of this school, that God raised up men and women faithful to his word and bold to speak it? And do you not rejoice that their profession of faith is your profession, their conviction your conviction?

Note well that institutions—whether schools like Biola or churches or denominations—generally do not pass from orthodoxy to heresy except through the way station of indifference. The rationalizing sometimes looks like this:

“Oh yes, those doctrines are all well and good. But really, they are not so important. Now, we personally believe those things, mind you, but maybe we should allow more flexibility for the sake of unity.”

“We have too many important issues of common concern to separate ourselves from other professing Christian groups by a doctrinal statement that includes such ‘shibboleths’ as biblical inerrancy or justification by faith alone. Believe it if you will, but don't believe it quite so loudly and so exclusively.”

“We really need to broaden our appeal by adopting a more generic approach to such matters. We can't possibly hope to win the culture war if we define ourselves as narrowly as this!”

May it not be so for us! We need fly the flag of our convictions proudly, and, if I might borrow a metaphor from that great nineteenth-century American theologian W. G. T. Shedd, let the banners of our belief stream in the wind for all to see.

- 1 Biola's statement of faith may be found at <http://www.biola.edu/about/doctrinal-statement/>
- 2 Philip Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 1:3-5.
- 3 John Leith, *Creeeds of the Churches* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 6.
- 4 Schaff, 1:4-5.
- 5 Leith makes this same observation. See Leith, 10.
- 6 Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 202.
- 7 Biola Board of Trustees Action approved May 22, 1998.
- 8 *Formula of Concord*, cited in Schaff, 3:93.
- 9 Leith, 5-6.
- 10 Actually, what follows is the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed as modified by the Synod of Toledo in 598.



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