

R. Scott Clark

**The Role of Creeds and
Confessions in Doing
Theology**

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By R. Scott Clark

A wise traveler makes preparations for a trip (Matt. 10:8–10). Any traveler who attempts a difficult journey without a map risks not arriving or worse. The Christian life is a journey to the heavenly city (Heb. 11:8–15). A map is a record of the journeys of travelers who have gone before us. Strangely, however, many Christians attempt the Christian journey without the benefit of maps—in this case, the ecumenical creeds and Reformed confessions.

THE NECESSITY OF CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS

Our word creed comes from the Latin word *credo*, “I believe.” A creed is typically a short statement of faith. The ecumenical creeds, including the Apostles’ Creed (developed during the first four centuries AD), the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed (often called the Nicene Creed; AD 325/381), the Athanasian Creed (after AD 428), and the Definition of Chalcedon (AD 451), have been widely accepted across the ages by multiple church traditions. In them, the ancient church responded to some of the great heresies of the Christian religion. For example, in the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed, the church defended the

biblical doctrine that God the Son and God the Spirit are of the same substance (consubstantial) with the Father. The Son is eternally begotten of the Father and the Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father. (The Third Council of Toledo in 589 added the so-called filioque clause that says the Spirit proceeds also from the Son. This revision has been received by the Lutheran and Reformed Churches.) Thus, according to the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed, the Son and the Spirit are not merely like God—they are God. Yet, though God is one in nature, He also exists in three distinct, coeternal persons who share equally in that one nature. Nowhere are the doctrines of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ more clearly taught than in the Athanasian Creed. The Definition of Chalcedon teaches us how to keep Jesus’ humanity and deity united in one person without confusing them. The Apostles’ Creed serves as a summary of the consensus of the ancient church on the great doctrines of the Christian faith. These are boundary markers beyond which no Christian may safely go. As the Athanasian Creed says, “Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic [that is, universal] faith.”

Our noun confession comes from the Latin verb *confiteor*, “to confess.” The great Reformed confessions include the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Canons of Dort (1619), and the Westminster Standards (1648). The idea of creeds and confessions did not originate in church history, however.

First, there are creeds and confessions in Scripture itself. One of the first examples occurs in Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” It is known as the Shema,

after the Hebrew word translated as “Hear!” in the verse. This most basic Israelite confession was repeated weekly in the synagogue during the intertestamental and New Testament periods. Our Lord Himself quoted it in Mark 12:29, and Paul refers to it in Romans 3:30 and Galatians 3:20. James alludes to the early Jewish Christian practice of reciting the Shema in James 2:19.

When we read the Scriptures with the creeds and confessions, we are reading them with the ecumenical church and with the Reformed churches.

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There are also confessional expressions in the New Testament. For example, in 1 Timothy 3:16, the Apostle Paul quotes a confession used in the churches:

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

He [Christ] was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.

The Shema and 1 Timothy 3:16 are brief accounts of the faith that touch on key aspects of the Christian faith. God is one. Jesus is God the Son incarnate, the ascended Lord and Savior. The Holy Spirit raised Him from the dead, and we are united to Him by grace alone through faith alone. Paul calls these

formulas “trustworthy saying[s]” (1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11; Titus 3:8), short summaries of Christian faith and practice.

Second, our Lord Himself commands us to confess the faith. He said, “So everyone who confesses me before men, I also will confess before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 10:32–33). We know that there was pressure on early Christians not to confess Christ (John 9:22). The Apostle Paul instructed Timothy to confess the faith (1 Tim. 6:12). The Apostle John called the churches of Asia Minor to confess the incarnation of Christ against the dualists who denied it (1 John 4:15; 2 John 7). Confession of Christ and His truth is so important that it is something all believers will do at the last day (Phil. 2:11) and even in heaven (Rev. 3:5).

Confessions and creeds are good, but they are also unavoidable. Even our friends who reject creeds have one. “No creed but Christ” is a very short and inadequate creed, but it is a creed nonetheless. Thus, the question is not whether we will have a confession but whether it will be biblical, ecumenical, and sound.

THE AUTHORITY OF CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS

One of the great concerns that animates resistance to creeds and confessions is the justifiable concern that human doctrines and traditions should not replace Scripture. The sole magisterial authority of the Word of God was the formal cause of the Protestant Reformation. This is what we mean by the Latin slogan *sola Scriptura*, “according to Scripture alone.” Where Rome confessed two streams of authority—church and

Scripture—the Protestant churches recognized the supreme ruling authority of Scripture alone. To the church they admitted only ministerial authority. The ecumenical creeds and the Reformed confessions are expressions of that ministerial authority. The Presbyterian and Reformed churches confess what they do about the faith and the Christian life because God's Word says what it says. The confessions serve the Scriptures. They are ecclesiastically sanctioned summaries of God's Word. Should they be found to be in need of correction to be made more faithful to God's Word, they may be revised by due process.

In the confessions themselves, the church declares that no other authority can rival God's Word. In article 7 of the Belgic Confession (1561), the Reformed churches declare that the "Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God" and everything that one "ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein." From the Scriptures we learn "the whole manner of worship," and Scripture alone is so authoritative that it is "unlawful for anyone," whether an Apostle or an angel, to contradict it. Merely human writings, no matter how highly regarded or ancient, cannot be of "equal value with" Scripture, which alone is the infallible rule for the Christian faith and life.

It is true that there are churches and even entire denominations that have relegated the ecumenical creeds and Reformed confessions to the museum or to the dustbin. In such cases, the fault lies not with the creeds and confessions but with infidelity. For those congregations and denominations that still believe God's Word as it was understood in the ancient church and in the Reformation, the creeds and confessions are the living voice

of the church's understanding of God's Word on the most important issues of Christian doctrine and living.

THE ROLE OF CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS

In the classical period of Reformed theology, most Reformed writers defined theology as having two aspects: doctrine and practice. They distinguished between theology as God knows it and theology as He reveals it to us, which is principally revealed to us in Scripture. This revelation, they taught, is an analogue of theology as God knows it. They described as "pilgrim theology" the aspects of theology as we know and do it.

Pilgrim is a figure of speech, and it brings us back to the beginning. Christians are on a journey. By His sovereign grace alone, God the Father has elected us in Christ, and the Holy Spirit has united us to Christ through faith alone. In the words of Belgic Confession 34, we have been redeemed by the "sprinkling of the precious blood of the Son of God, who is our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the tyranny of Pharaoh, who is the devil, and to enter the spiritual land of Canaan."

Systematic theologies and biblical theologies and other works of individual writers have genuine value, but the ecumenical creeds and Reformed confessions are more than the opinions of individuals. They are the considered, prayerful judgment of Christ's church on the most important issues of the Christian faith and life. In legal terms, a lawyer may think what he will,

but his opinion is one thing and a Supreme Court ruling is another.

Many have been tempted to read the Scriptures in isolation from the rest of the church. That is a great mistake. Historically, it has led to serious errors. For example, in the early seventeenth century, the Socinians tried to do just that, and they abandoned the doctrine of the Trinity, the deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, and other essential biblical truths. This is what can happen when we travel without a map, without the creeds and confessions. When we read the Scriptures with the creeds and confessions at hand, we are reading the Scriptures with the ecumenical church and with the Reformed churches. We are learning from their journey before us and learning with them the most vital doctrines of the Christian faith and basic Christian practice: the observance of the Lord's Day, attendance to worship and the means of grace, prayer, repentance, and dying to sin and living to Christ by grace alone.