

REFORMED CONFESSIONALISM

D. BLAIR SMITH


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Scripture quotations from the New Testament use the ESV's alternate, footnoted translation of *adelphoi* ("brothers and sisters").

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For Rob Norris,
who modeled for me a healthy confessionism

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FOREWORD

It has often been said—sometimes with a sense of humor and sometimes in annoyance—that Presbyterian and Reformed churches love to do things “decently and in order.” I can understand both the humor and the frustration that lie behind that sentiment. We love our plans, our minutes, our courts, and our committees. Presbyterian and Reformed folks have been known to appoint committees just to oversee other committees (reminding me of the old *Onion* headline that announced “New Starbucks Opens in Rest Room of Existing Starbucks”). We like doing things so decently that we expect our church officers to know three things: the Bible, our confessions, and a book with *Order* in its title.

But before we shake our heads in disbelief at those uber-Reformed types (physician, heal thyself!), we should recall that before “decently and in order” was a Presbyterian predilection, it was a biblical command (see 1 Cor. 14:40). Paul’s injunction for the church to be marked by propriety and decorum, to be well-ordered like troops drawn up in ranks, is a fitting conclusion to a portion of Scripture that deals with confusion regarding

gender, confusion at the Lord's Table, confusion about spiritual gifts, confusion in the body of Christ, and confusion in public worship. "Decently and in order" sounds pretty good compared to the mess that prevailed in Corinth.

A typical knock on Presbyterian and Reformed Christians is that though supreme in head, they are deficient in heart. We are the emotionless stoics, the changeless wonders, God's frozen chosen. But such veiled insults would not have impressed the apostle Paul, for he knew that the opposite of order in the church is not free-flowing spontaneity; it is self-exalting chaos. God never favors confusion over peace (see 1 Cor. 14:33). He never pits theology against doxology or head against heart. David Garland put it memorably: "The Spirit of ardor is also the Spirit of order."¹

When Jason Helopoulos approached me about writing a foreword for this series, I was happy to oblige—not only because Jason is one of my best friends (and we both root for the hapless Chicago Bears) but because these careful, balanced, and well-reasoned volumes will occupy an important place on the book stalls of Presbyterian and Reformed churches. We need short, accessible books written by thoughtful, seasoned pastors for regular members on the foundational elements of church life and ministry. That's what we need, and that's what this series delivers: wise answers to many of the church's most practical and pressing questions.

This series of books on Presbyterian and Reformed theology, worship, and polity is not a multivolume exploration of 1 Corinthians 14:40, but I am glad it is unapologetically written with Paul's command in mind. The reality is that every church will worship in some way, pray in some way, be led in some way, be structured in some way, and do baptism and the Lord's Supper in some way. Every church is living out some form of theology—even if that theology is based on pragmatism instead of biblical principles. Why wouldn't we want the life we share in the church to be shaped by the best exegetical, theological, and historical reflections? Why wouldn't we want to be thoughtful instead of thoughtless? Why wouldn't we want all things in the life we live together to be done decently and in good order? That's not the Presbyterian and Reformed way. That's God's way, and Presbyterian and Reformed Christians would do well not to forget it.

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Introduction

THE BLESSING OF GUARDRAILS

When contemporary Christians think of what blesses the church, confessionalism is likely not the first (or even tenth!) thing that jumps to mind. Perhaps you have picked up this book wondering to yourself how creeds, confessions, or catechisms could ever be blessings. There are many reasons why this might be the case.

Perhaps you are reluctant to give confessionalism much time because you come from a church that used lots of creeds, confessions, and catechisms, yet seemed far from biblical—worried more about its own tradition and procedures than about its faithfulness to Scripture. You may wonder if confessionalism can bring blessing when, in your experience, it has led people *away* from Scripture rather than *to* Scripture.

But perhaps you carry concerns about confessionalism from a different end of the church spectrum: You worry that confessionalism gives the Holy Spirit no freedom to lead and to work. You ask, “Won’t we miss the blessing of the Spirit’s dynamism and power if we hold to

the formality that often comes with creeds, confessions, and catechisms?”

Or you may carry still another concern—that confessionalism smells like your grandparents’ attic. Something there *was* valuable, but *now* it’s moldy, dusty, and no longer very compelling or useful. Confessional standards had their day, certainly, but they’re no longer relevant to the concerns of the contemporary church and may even be off-putting to younger generations. Surely they are best left in the church’s attic for the sake of the church’s mission.

Or you may see creeds, confessions, and catechisms as potential competitors to Scripture. Scripture should be our authority in faith and practice, so you wonder what possible value supposed authorities like creeds, confessions, and catechisms hold for the church.

These are all legitimate reasons for you to question the “blessing” of confessionalism, and the pages that follow will address them. But you may have a more fundamental question. Perhaps you’re not quite sure what a creed, a confession, or a catechism is, or what *confessionalism* might mean. Before proceeding any further, then, let’s define some terms.

Creed, Confession, and Catechism (Briefly!)¹

Most basically, a creed is a statement of belief. It comes from a Latin verb, *credo*, which means “I believe.”

In the context of this book, however, a creed is a brief statement of Christian belief that was composed in the foundational period of the church. I specifically have in mind the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian creeds, which proclaim belief in the essentials of the Christian faith by centering on God's triune nature: He is three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—yet one God.² Due to their brevity, clarity, and personal character, they are often recited in worship services.

Confessions were developed by early Protestant Reformers and by denominations that came out of the Reformation. While a creed is about the One *in whom* we believe, a confession more fully elaborates on *what* we believe.³ These beliefs often carry the distinctives of a denomination or theological tradition, such as an affirmation of infant baptism in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Finally, catechisms are downstream from confessions, taking the doctrine taught in them and communicating it in a question-and-answer format.

Confessionalism

If you believe that the Bible is God's Word, you might think it is enough to simply be "biblical." Why would we need creeds, confessions, and catechisms if we have Scripture? The Bible is filled with rich, deep teaching. Shouldn't we simply submit to its words and use those

words when we confess our faith? Can't we just look to Jesus in the Gospels and worship him?

As good as this sounds, the nature of our faith demands more than that. For example, we learn in Isaiah 6:3 that God is perfectly holy. This is a true statement concerning one of God's eternal attributes. But what is the character of God's holiness? How does it relate to his other attributes? How does it relate to the holiness he calls us to as Christians? Or take the Jesus of the Gospels: Can we worship him without desiring to know all that God's Word reveals about him?

Being biblical is imperative, yet to understand the answers to these questions, we'll need to move beyond the bare words of Scripture. We do so not to add to Scripture but to draw out its meaning. Rather than cherry-picking a verse here and a verse there, confessional Christians seek out what the *whole* Bible says on a topic and how that teaching harmonizes with everything else the Bible says. Because creeds, confessions, and catechisms show how the *whole* of biblical doctrine holds together, and not just our favorite parts, they invite us to explore elements of our faith that we might otherwise neglect.

This is what the early church was doing with the word *Trinity*, for example.⁴ Even though the word *Trinity* is not found in the Bible, it expresses biblical truth. Specifically, it helps us to articulate the biblical teaching that God is one being and yet three persons. Every Christian parent has had their child ask a question like "What is prayer?" or

“What does the Lord’s Supper mean?” How do we answer them? No one chapter in Scripture gives a comprehensive definition of prayer or the Lord’s Supper, so our creeds, confessions, and catechisms helpfully and concisely articulate the contents of our faith, on these and other topics, as expressed throughout the whole counsel of God.

To be *Reformed* is to believe in the final authority of Scripture. To hold to Reformed *confessionalism* is to recognize subordinate doctrinal authorities—such as creeds, confessions, and catechisms—that help us articulate the core beliefs of our faith. These subordinate authorities are well-established in the history of the church and have withstood the test of time. They are themselves the products of interpreting Scripture. In turn, they teach us faithful ways to interpret Scripture. Thus, creeds, confessions, and catechisms not only help summarize the contents of Scripture but also help Christians read and interpret Scripture. In other words, confessional Christians and churches don’t think in terms of “just me, Jesus, and my Bible.” They seek to read and believe in union with Christians past and present throughout the world. In fact, to go “straight to the Bible” for Christian teaching is an impossibility, and that general posture undercuts biblical faith. John Calvin once said that he’d be very happy simply to confess Scripture. However, he acknowledged, since many false teachers have Scripture on their lips, we need the careful theological language of confessional statements to draw out the meaning of Scripture and protect us from heresy.⁵

In summary, confessionalism upholds the final authority of Scripture while being guided by ancient creeds and reformational confessions and catechisms, all of which are derived from and stand under Scripture as lesser authorities. Taken together, creeds, confessions, and catechisms form the “confessional standards” of a church. They give us a firm place on which to stand with the body of Christ as we read and confess what Scripture teaches.

While confessionalism may be misunderstood or seen as a hindrance by some today, those within the historic Reformed tradition—the tradition of this writer—see creeds, confessions, and catechisms as primary tools for promoting the church’s health.⁶ This book seeks to clearly explain the blessings of confessionalism for you as a member of the church, offer advice on the practice of confessionalism, and answer common questions about confessionalism within the church.

The Blessing of Guardrails

One image encapsulates the blessing that confessionalism can bring to the church and to the Christian: guardrails. Guardrails guide cars *away* from swerving into dangerous, even deadly, terrain. Properly used, creeds, confessions, and catechisms function similarly: Adhering to them keeps us away from false doctrine and heresies that are deadly to the soul. Guardrails, however, not only protect drivers from veering where they are

not supposed to be but also clarify where they *can* drive safely. Within the church, confessional standards show us the road along which we can practice healthy and fruitful theology according to Scripture.

Furthermore, creeds, confessions, and catechisms are sturdy guardrails. Their integrity has been tried and tested by the buffeting winds of the centuries, and, as a result, they lead the church to a faithful understanding of Scripture. Just as guardrails guide drivers to their intended destinations, faithful creeds and confessions lead the church to love the triune God and devote itself to him.

An Overview of This Book

The first chapter of this book defines creeds, confessions, and catechisms in more detail and explains their relationship to Scripture. The second chapter discusses why the church confesses at all. The third chapter provides a brief history of the ancient creeds and the Reformed confessions and catechisms and considers whether the church should update confessional documents or write new ones. The next two chapters connect confession-ism to the life and ministry of the church: Chapter 4 explains how confessionalism blesses the church's *teaching* and *discipleship*, while chapter 5 demonstrates how confessionalism contributes to the *overall health* of the church. The book concludes with answers to a series of common questions about confessionalism.

1

WHAT IS CONFESSIONALISM?

In a book titled *Reformed Confessionalism*, first things first: What is a creed, confession, or catechism? I briefly defined these words in the introduction. In this chapter I aim to provide more background and explanation while also addressing a crucial question: What is the proper relationship between Scripture and confessional documents?

As we'll see, creeds, confessions, and catechisms have different histories and functions, yet the *use* of such confessional standards falls under the broader category of confessionalism. Let's start by looking at the earliest confessional documents of the church: creeds.

Creeds

We sometimes refer to someone as having a “personal creed.” For example, “This I Believe,” a radio program from the 1950s, gave people from all walks of life just a few minutes to state the guiding beliefs that shaped their

lives. More formally, however, a creed is a brief, authoritative statement of belief. Traditionally, that has meant *religious* belief. World religions vary in how creedal they are. Islam, for example, has its singular *shahada* (“There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet”) and five pillars, whereas Hinduism has almost as many creeds as it has gods (millions!). Christianity has been creedal from the beginning, and the New Testament itself contains what scholars believe may have been the church’s earliest creedal statements.

For example, the apostle Paul instructs Timothy to follow “the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me” (2 Tim. 1:13). Jude speaks of a “faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Taken together, Christianity teaches that, because we have revelation from God himself, the content of our faith is fixed. At the heart of Christianity lies not only objective doctrinal content but also a form—or a pattern—to the words that articulate this content. Put differently, Christian truth has a basic vocabulary. Furthermore, there is a pattern for how that vocabulary should fit together. The ancient creeds are examples of ways that the basic vocabulary of the Christian faith has been put into a clear pattern. However, well before the ancient creeds, or even the New Testament, we see the idea of a creed in Scripture.

God gave to Moses the simple creed—the Shema—that was so vital to the Israelite faith: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4). Rooted

in that monotheistic confession, Paul states that “there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:6). God is one, and Paul, using a creedal formula, counts both the Father and the Son, Jesus Christ, as one. While distinguishing the first and second persons of the Trinity using the words “from whom” and “through whom,” Paul also affirms their essential oneness by echoing the language of the Shema.

Other New Testament passages contain creedal language, but, rather than focusing on the persons of the Trinity, they summarize the events of Christ’s saving work. Most famous among these is Philippians 2:5–11. This passage begins with the Son, who “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” (v. 6), who came in human likeness, who obediently humbled himself all the way to and through the cross, and who is now highly exalted with the name above every name,

So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every
tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of
God the Father. (vv. 10–11)

Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, Paul gives a concise summary of Christ’s work that gets to the heart of the gospel:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

The New Testament, therefore, contains brief, authoritative statements of religious belief that follow the “pattern of sound words” and summarize the “faith once delivered.” It is worth noting that these early creedal statements center on the persons of the Trinity and the work of Christ. In this way, they gave shape to subsequent creeds of the Christian church.

The idea of a creed, then, is a biblical one. The Bible itself contains various examples of “creeds before the creeds.” That is to say, before there were the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, with their Trinitarian shape and their focus on the work of Christ, their biblical forerunners succinctly described the heart of the Christian faith.

Creeds are expressions of corporate belief that are designed to be used in the worship of the church. They are not individual statements of personal belief; they have fixed wording so that they can be confessed, chanted, or sung by believers *together* in the liturgy of the church.

Thus, we can define a creed as *a brief statement of faith centered on the Trinity and the work of Christ that is intended to be universally binding within the church*. This intention is what gives creeds their confessional nature.

Confessions share some of these characteristics, but, as we will see, they are more expansive in scope.

Confessions

Confessions were born in the tumult of the Reformation. Ministers and scholars had been wrangling over a whole host of theological and ecclesiastical issues for centuries. Since they result from centuries-long reflection on Scripture, as well as the Reformers' concern to re-center the church's belief and practice on the authority of Scripture, confessions are longer—in some cases, *much* longer—than creeds. They are built on the creeds, but they go beyond them in scope.

Confessions emerged from denominational contexts with particular concerns. This is a book on *Reformed* confessionalism, yet even across Reformed confessions, a variety of wording and emphasis reflects the different contexts in which they were written. Thus, it is fair to say that creeds are broadly accepted throughout the church, whereas confessions reflect the original concerns of a local denomination and are thus relevant to a smaller number of believers. This is not to say that a confession can't gain adherents outside its original context. The Westminster Confession of Faith, for example, was first written in England for use in the English, Scottish, and Irish churches, but it eventually gained millions of adherents in North America, South Korea, Brazil, and beyond.

In summary, confessions (1) are more exhaustive statements of doctrine than creeds, (2) are often from the Reformation period, and (3) cover a wide array of theological topics that reflect specific denominational concerns.

Catechisms

Catechisms differ from creeds and confessions in that they deliver doctrine in a question-and-answer format. The oral instruction of new believers, known as *catechesis*, has a rich history in the church. In the earliest centuries, converts often learned Christian doctrine through a series of questions and answers. As this practice matured, it usually focused on the Apostles' Creed (Christian doctrine), the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments (Christian practice).¹

Protestant Reformers wanted to retrieve this ancient practice for church and family discipleship, and so they produced a flurry of catechisms in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One of the earliest was Martin Luther's Small Catechism for children, which included teaching on the sacraments as well as the typical topics of early catechesis. He covered the same territory in his Large Catechism, which he designed for ministers to use to teach their flocks.² The Heidelberg Catechism, one of the first significant Reformed catechisms, addressed similar topics with a redemptive focus.

The Heidelberg Catechism is an example of a stand-alone catechism. Others, like the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms, draw from doctrine that has been already expressed in a confession. The Westminster Larger Catechism, like Luther's Large Catechism, was designed for ministers to use as they taught the faith to their congregations. Instead of the Apostles' Creed, it uses the Westminster Confession to shape its structure; like other catechisms, it also exposits the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments. The Shorter Catechism was based on the Larger, but it was geared toward children and those who knew less of Christianity. It is well-suited to all contexts, including family worship.

One more aspect of many catechisms makes them unique. Creeds and confessions primarily focus on doctrine—that is, what we are to believe about God, his Word, his works, Christ, the church, and the like. Although catechisms often unpack such teaching, they also examine how believers ought to respond to these truths. By studying the Lord's Prayer, we learn what to pray for. By studying the Ten Commandments, we learn how to address complex ethical questions.

Two Blessings

In sum, creeds, confessions, and catechisms are similar insofar as they are statements of faith with fixed

wording that articulate both what Christians believe and, by implication, what we don't believe. In this they reflect a biblical impulse to clearly communicate the faith that has been revealed once for all in Scripture. With their focus on the Trinity and the person and work of Christ, creeds are especially clear on the "ABC's" of the faith and are universally recognized in orthodox³ churches. Confessions and catechisms reflect the fuller teaching of Scripture on everything from creation to justification to the sacraments to the last judgment. Different confessions are recognized by different denominations or particular theological traditions, such as the Reformed tradition.

Creeds, confessions, and catechisms reflect the public teaching of the church and clearly express its doctrine. Two blessings flow from this. One is the blessing of *unity*: Confessional standards unite those who hold in faith to the doctrines they express. The second is the blessing of *division*: Those who cannot confess the doctrines of confessional standards show themselves to be separate from a particular church's doctrine or, more seriously, not united to the church at all. Drawing confessional lines holds us accountable to the truths of Scripture and reveals when we are straying.

Scripture and the Confessional Standards

We've seen that early creedal statements appear in the Bible and that creeds and the best of confessions

and catechisms are grounded in biblical teaching. Their authority is subordinate to Scripture. The Westminster Confession of Faith states that “all controversies of religion . . . [and] all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits” should be examined by none other than “the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture,” which the Confession calls “the supreme judge” (1.10). This means that Scripture, just like the Supreme Court of the United States, is always the last and highest court of appeal—its authority is unrivaled. There *are* other courts, and they can speak with a measure of authority, but they do not carry the *final* authority of the Supreme Court. In matters of the Christian faith, creeds, confessions, and catechisms—and tradition more broadly—carry the weight of *an* authority, but they are not the *supreme* judge and, therefore, not the final authority. Only God’s Word holds that position.

Scripture, as God’s final voice of revelation, can never be added to, subtracted from, or otherwise amended. Creeds, confessions, and catechisms can. But the standard by which they would be amended is not the shifting authorities of any given age. No, the standard is Scripture.

The Reformed Belgic Confession, after stating in article 5 that the sixty-six books of the Bible are to be received “for the regulating . . . of our faith,” goes on to confess in article 7 that “we must not consider human writings—no matter how holy their authors may have been—equal to the divine writings . . . nor councils, decrees, or official

decisions above the truth of God.” The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican church make the same point when they address the authority of the ancient creeds. Article 8 states that the Nicene, Athanasian, and Apostles’ Creeds are to be received and believed because “they may be proved by . . . Holy Scripture.” Thus, in a Reformed understanding, Scripture sits firmly above creeds, confessions, and catechisms. The authority of confessional standards must be checked by the even higher authority of the Bible, which is the very voice of God. Indeed, the authority enjoyed by creeds, confessions, and catechisms is derived from their faithfulness to Scripture.

The Reformers had a wonderfully alliterative Latin phrase that encapsulated the proper relationship between Scripture and secondary authorities: The Bible is the *norma normans non normata*—that is, “the norming norm that is itself not normed.” Confessional standards can and should be “norms” within the church, but they are open to being “normed,” whereas Scripture itself is the only “norm” that has no other norm outside of it. Put more simply, the Bible is the ultimate standard. It is the standard by which the church’s creeds, confessions, and catechisms must be measured, and it itself is not measured by any other standard.

The Bible is our supreme authority because it is uniquely “breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16).⁴ Jesus confirms Scripture’s authority over human doctrine in Matthew 22. There he is engaging the Sadducees, who

denied the possibility of resurrection. Jesus rebukes their bad doctrine, saying that they “know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God” (v. 29). He goes on in verse 32 to correct their faulty theologizing based upon the verb tense of a word in Exodus 3:6.⁵ Doctrine—whether held by a group of religious authorities or stated in creeds, confessions, and catechisms—must answer to the written Word of God. The Bible’s relationship with confessional standards, or with any doctrine articulated by a church, is not arbitrary. Its power to determine and correct our doctrine comes from its status as the Word of God. God is King of the universe, and all authority and power are his. Therefore, his Word is absolute, and all other human words must bow to it.

Conclusion

To be confessional is to adhere to creeds, confessions, and catechisms. This chapter distinguished between creeds, confessions, and catechisms while also showing what they hold in common as public statements of Christian doctrine. Confessionalism is often criticized for being divisive. While it is true that confessionalism can be abused to create division, its first function is to bring together those who hold common beliefs. That is, a healthy confessionalism unites Christians in faith around doctrinal truths drawn from Scripture. Their unity is in a common confession, yes, but what genuinely binds them

together is the truth of the confession, which depends on its faithfulness to God's Word. Scripture is always the ultimate standard of Reformed confessionalism. Rather than ruling out the existence of other, lesser standards, Scripture establishes them. To reject the creeds, confessions, and catechisms that serve as standards within the church is to reject their function as boundary markers of Christian or, at the very least, denominational teaching.

But why do we confess in the first place? Is it simply because the church has come up with these statements and traditions, or is something more fundamental to our faith at work when we confess? It is to these questions that we will turn next.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. As you begin this book, consider your experiences with creeds, confessions, and catechisms. With what confessional documents, if any, are you familiar? Where have you encountered them?
2. Why can unity and division both be blessings for the church? Can you think of times when you personally have seen this to be the case?
3. The author introduces a saying of the Reformers: The Bible is "the norming norm that is itself not normed." What does this mean? What are the practical implications of this belief?