

# A CASE FOR EXPLICIT CREEDALISM: Meaningful Togetherness Is Impossible Without It

By Randall Klynsma (and Rev. David Fagrey)

In a recent Facebook discussion I wrote:

ME I think identifying oneself with the historic creeds and confessions is much more helpful than making a summary list of beliefs you hold about the Bible. What I really want to know is do you (as an individual and church) hold to "the faith once for all delivered to the saints" in the same way the church has throughout history. My view is that what is new is most likely wrong and short sighted if not agreement with what the church has believed and taught in the past.

For me the question is not, what does the Bible teach... the Bible is clear. The question is do you really believe it and has your life been transformed by it.

To which the following replies were made:

Holding to a confession is a simple way of telling someone what is encompassed in your understanding of "the faith once for all delivered to the saints".

ME I'm comfortable saying everything in the historic Reformed confessions accurately summarizes what the Bible teaches. They accurately summarize what the Scriptures teach and since the Scriptures don't change, the message... I.E. the Truth, doesn't change. I don't look to scholarship to redefine the essential tenets of the faith. To explain and clarify and guard from error and attacks? Sure. But if they claim to have come up with something new or formerly unseen or undiscovered, I will be fairly skeptical.

There are many churches and professing Christians who do not believe in creeds or confessions. They have slogans like "no creed but the Bible," or "no creed but Christ." But the fact is: creeds are inescapable. The word *creed* comes from the Latin *credo*, which means "I believe." Statements such as "I believe Jesus is Lord" or "I believe in the resurrection of Christ" are creeds, whether or not they are written down. Even to say, "I don't have a creed" is a creed. And the statement "No creed but Christ" is a poor creed because it does not tell us anything about Christ. Furthermore, how can a person know whether or not he can honestly join with a particular church if he cannot find a statement of the church's belief?

Some people are against creeds simply because they are man-made. But just because something is man-made does not mean it cannot be accurate. A road map is not a perfect interpretation of the surface of the earth but it's still accurate. Just because our interpretations of the Bible are not perfect does not mean they are not accurate. The purpose of a creed is to provide accurate summaries of the Bible's basic teachings.

## THE BIBLE REQUIRES CREEDS

It is not enough to say we believe the Bible. All cults and heretics appeal to the Bible. The real question is how one *understands* the teaching of the Bible. Just quoting Scripture is not

good enough. Satan quoted Scripture when he tempted Jesus (Matthew 4:6); indeed, Satan very deceptively misinterpreted Scripture.

Therefore, the Bible has to be *correctly* interpreted. In 2 Timothy 2:15 the apostle Paul told Timothy: “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, *rightly dividing* [rightly interpreting] the word of truth.” The Bible must be carefully studied and interpreted. We must put various verses together and see how they affect each other. No single passage tells us all about God or Jesus. It is necessary to assemble all the verses, or as many as we can, and make a statement that summarizes the total meaning. That is what a creed is for: to provide careful and accurate summaries of the basic teachings of the Bible.

There are many people who assume no one can really know what the Bible teaches, because there are so many different interpretations. But it is a lie to say the truth cannot be known. In John 17:17, Jesus said, “[God’s] Word is Truth.” In Ephesians 4:17, Paul said to speak the truth in love. The Bible would never tell us to speak the truth if the truth could not be known. On Judgment Day God will not allow the excuse: “I didn’t know what to believe because there were so many interpretations.” God will ask us: “Did you study My Word? Did you ask Me for understanding?”

We must *learn* how to rightly interpret the Bible. It is the Church’s duty to teach God’s people how to rightly interpret the Bible. The church is “the pillar and ground of the truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). In 2 Peter 3:16: Peter warned that *untaught* and *unstable* people *twist* the Scriptures. We must be *taught* by godly teachers how to rightly interpret the Bible. This cannot be done without creeds: accurate summaries of truth.

### **CREEDS PRESERVE A CORRECT INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE**

Jesus gave to His Church leaders (who elected by the congregation) to declare the truth and to refute false teaching (see Acts 20:28-30). Jesus said, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves” (Matthew 7:15). We should not be surprised that there are so many false interpretations of the Bible. Jesus and His apostles told us in advance that there would be many false interpretations of the Bible! The fact that Jesus said to beware of false teaching means it is possible to identify what is false and what is true. It is precisely because there are so many false interpretations of the Bible (so many false creeds) that we need *correct* creeds to preserve *correct* interpretations of the Bible.

Experience has shown that creeds serve as a protection against false teaching. More often than not, those who oppose creeds and confessions normally hold corrupt opinions. Historically, the great Ecumenical Church Councils decided issues of primary importance. The Doctrine of

the Trinity and the Two Natures of Christ were settled in the midst of controversy and heresy. These are issues on which orthodoxy depends and without which the Church is ungrounded. The author of this paper believes all Christian Churches should explicitly acknowledge their connection to the Ancient Church.

### **CREEDS ARE A FOUNDATION FOR TRUE UNITY**

In Amos 3:2, the prophet asks rhetorically, “Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?” The obvious answer is “No.” Two people cannot walk together unless they are agreed. There is no true unity unless we agree on what the Bible teaches. There is no unity if every person has different ideas about who Jesus is or how He saves sinners.

Scripture commands believers to be like-minded, to have the same correct interpretation of the Bible. There is only one correct interpretation. God does not speak out of both sides of His mouth; therefore the goal is to arrive *together* at the correct interpretation (Romans 15:5-6). It does *not* say each person gets to interpret the Bible any way they want to. If I see something in the Bible that no one else can see then my interpretation is suspect. The Holy Spirit does not reveal the truth to just one believer and then make all the others depend on him. The Holy Spirit guides all of God’s people into the truth (John 16:13). True unity is when we have the same correct interpretation of the Bible. And we need creeds and confessions to show our agreement and unity.

Furthermore, before the church (or individual churches) can detect false teachers and put them out, the officers and members must be agreed on the truth. The truth must be publicly known and written down as the official position of the church. This extends from the relatively brief summaries of the Ancient Creeds to the broader and deeper confessional statements that came at and after the Protestant Reformation.

### **CONCLUSION**

There is no need to reinvent the wheel. There is no need to reinvent Christianity every Sunday. We should certainly follow creeds only so far as they make sense of Scripture, but it is surely foolish, arrogant, and anti-historical to reject one of the primary ways in which the church has painstakingly transmitted her faith from age to age. In no branch of science would there be any real advance if every generation started fresh with no dependence upon what past generations have achieved.

We are going to follow someone’s interpretation of the Bible, whether it is our own or someone else’s. How much better to submit to the creeds and confessions that have been tried and tested by true and faithful churches down through the centuries!

## The Reformed Church in the United States Practices

The Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS) is a communion of Christian churches in the Reformed tradition. We stand on the great Reformation principles of salvation by *grace alone*, through *faith alone*, in *Christ alone*, according to the *Scriptures alone*, to the *glory of God alone*.

Established in the 1700s and reorganized in the 1930s, today we seek to proclaim the truth in love as we remain committed to God-centered worship, historic biblical orthodoxy, confessional Reformed theology, Christian missions, and Presbyterian government. Our aim is to minister the gospel of sovereign grace to the world. Join us in serving Christ in our part of His vineyard.

The RCUS does not follow unwritten traditions. It has an objective body of doctrinal statements of faith or standards which define and limit what we teach. We are committed to the historic Christian Creeds and the Confessions of the Reformation. Specifically we are committed to the *Three Forms of Unity*: the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort. (from webpage [www.rcus.org/doctrine](http://www.rcus.org/doctrine)).

### Formula of Subscription

When men are licensed to the gospel ministry or installed as teachers of theology, they are to subscribe to the Three Forms by signing their name to the following:

*I hereby testify that I honestly and truly accept the doctrine of the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession of Faith, and the Canons of Dort as in accordance with the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, and promise faithfully to preach and defend the same. (Constitution, Art. 22)*

### Concern of Church... converts or disciples, or both?

In fact, to manifest the unity of the faith we also believe that members should be taught to confess our Three Forms as the faithful interpretation of Scripture (Constitution, Art. 4). It is especially incumbent upon the pastors and elders of the congregations to see that the youth of the church are properly instructed in the basic teachings of the Christian faith (Constitution, Art. 182). Therefore:

*Every pastor shall carefully prepare the youth in his pastoral charge for communicant membership in the Church by diligently instructing them in the doctrines and duties of the Christian religion. The period of instruction shall, if possible, be so extended that the pupils memorize and are able to recite the entire Heidelberg Catechism before confirmation. The course of instruction shall include catechetical explanation and memorization, Bible history, Bible readings and memorizations, and the study of the books and contents of the Bible, the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Canons of Dort, church history, also the singing and memorization of Psalms, hymns, and Scripture songs. (Constitution, Art. 192)*