

## **Why Do We Need Creeds and Confessions?**

A Reformed church is a confessional church. That is to say, it stands with the historic Christian faith and Protestant Reformation by confessing certain doctrines to be true. Those doctrines are summarized in ecclesiastical statements known as creeds and confessions. Without those creeds and confessions, a Reformed church loses its identity. Indeed, without creeds and confessions, no church can avoid an identity crisis.

For some, such an emphasis upon creeds and confessions might seem a little strange, perhaps even alarming. Why should a Bible-believing church hold so firmly to uninspired and fallible documents written by men? After all, we have the Bible, which alone is the inspired Word of God and only rule for our faith and life. Why should Christians bother with things like the Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession and Canons of Dort?

Those are fair questions. What follows is a brief explanation of why we use creeds and confessions in the URCNA. In short, we do so because they serve Christ's church by preserving, protecting, and providing: They preserve the church's unity in the truth, protect the church from heresy (false teaching), and provide the church with instruction.

### **I. Creeds & Confessions Preserve the Church's Unity in the Truth**

It is often said, "doctrine divides, but love unites," or "doctrine divides, but practice unites." The idea behind both of these statements is that an emphasis upon theology will cripple Christ's church by leading her into debates over theology. Instead, the church should focus on loving each other and doing good works. In fact, one of the most popular evangelical leaders in America recently said, "The first Reformation was about doctrine; the second one needs to be about behavior... We need a reformation not of creeds but deeds."

To pit doctrine against love or practice, however, is to create a false dichotomy. Paul repeatedly commends the churches for their faith in Christ and love for one another (Eph. 1.15; 3.17; Col. 1.4; 1 Thess. 1.3; 3.6; 2 Thess. 1.3; Titus 2.2; 3.15; Phlm. 1.5). Our unity as Christians is based on the truth we confess (i.e. doctrine). Our responsibility to love one another and perform good works is always to be done in response to that truth. To divorce doctrine from love and good works is to profess a religion different from Christianity, for Christianity is based on the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, our love for one another and duty to perform good works are commanded of every Christian (John 13.34-35; 15.12; Eph. 2.10; Titus 3.8; 1 John 3.10-23; 4.7-5.3). But the gospel is a message to be believed, not a mode of behavior. The gospel is the message of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ who alone saves sinners from the wrath of God. This message is received through faith alone in Christ alone. When that message is believed with true faith, a change in behavior will be the result. To elevate deeds above creeds, however, is to distort Christianity into mere pietism and moralism. Indeed, it is to base our unity on something other

than the truth.

This is why we must confess essential doctrine. To neglect essential doctrine is to neglect the foundation of our unity. In the church, our unity is not based on our ethnicity, political party, or consumer preferences. Our unity is based strictly on the gospel and the biblical truths we confess. That is why we call our confessions the Three Forms of Unity. We stand as a diverse people from every tongue, nation and tribe, but united in our confession.

Moreover, unity is not something we can produce artificially. Only God can create this unity, and he has done so in Jesus Christ. We are simply called to maintain this unity. Writing to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul tells Christians to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4.3). In the very next verse he says, “there is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph. 4.4-6). He states these seven articles of the Christian faith in what some New Testament scholars believe was a creed that new converts recited just before they were baptized and received visibly into the church. The point that Paul makes is very clear: there is no unity apart from the truth.

Someone might ask, “Why not use the Bible alone? The Bible is the only written authority and inerrant rule for the faith and life of the church. Creeds and confessions, on the other hand, are documents that are capable of error. Why don’t we just say, ‘No creed but Christ’ or ‘No creed but the Bible’?” The answer is very simple. Creeds and confessions are necessary because they are ecclesiastical statements about what we believe the Bible to teach. Statements like “No creed but Christ” or “No creed but the Bible” are actually self-contradictory. Those statements are creeds in themselves.

The word “creed” comes from the Latin *credo*, which simply means, “I believe.” A creed is simply a summary of what one believes. And a confession is similar. A confession is a more detailed explanation of the Christian faith. The word “confession” comes from the Latin *confessio*, which means “I acknowledge.” Virtually every Christian has a creed and a confession of some sort, whether he realizes it or not.

Let’s say you asked a Christian friend about his beliefs. Your friend, wanting to be faithful to the Word of God, says, “I believe the Bible.” This, of course, is a good answer, but it is very general and broad – the Bible is a big book! You then ask, “But what do you believe the Bible teaches? What does it teach about God? What does it teach about Christ? What does it say about salvation?” At that moment, your friend is forced to make a creedal statement. He is forced to make a confession. As soon as he begins to summarize what the Bible teaches about God, Christ, salvation, or any other doctrine, he has made a confession! This is what Peter did in Matthew 16 when Jesus asked him, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” He made a confession.

A personal confession is a good and important thing. But as one body of Christ, we ought to

confess the same things. We need to be in agreement on the essential doctrines of the Christian faith. Especially those churches which hope to be obedient to God's command to demonstrate practical unity must make a unified confession if they are to walk together (Amos 3:3). Creeds and confessions are an aid to that end. They summarize essential apostolic doctrine and allow us to stand united as Christ's church with one believing heart and one confessing tongue. They help preserve the church's unity in the truth.

## **II. Creeds & Confessions Protect the Church from Heresy**

It is interesting to note that creedal statements often appear in Scripture. For example, in Deuteronomy 6:4 we find the great Shema: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." Jews have recited this creed since the days of Moses. It was an important creed because it protected the Israelites from the heresy of polytheism, the belief that there are many gods. When Israel received this creed, they were in the process of being brought out of Egypt where they had lived for hundreds of years. Egypt was a culture steeped in polytheism. There were deities for virtually every conceivable area of the universe. There was a god for fertility, a god for agriculture, a god for rain, a god for the sun, etc. Coming out of Egypt and into the promised land of Canaan, it was vital for Israel to know that there is only one true and living God. He alone is the Creator of the sun, moon and stars, who filled the air with birds, the sea with fish, and created all animals and mankind. He is sovereign over all. This simple creed, the Shema, helped to protect Israel from the falsehood of polytheism.

We also see creedal statements in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul sought to correct the terrible heresy circulating in the Corinthian church which denied the bodily resurrection. The first thing he does is quote a creed with which they were familiar. He says, "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" (1 Cor. 15:3-4). He then unpacks that little creed throughout the rest of the chapter, explaining that one cannot deny the resurrection of the body without also denying the resurrection of Christ (and thus the gospel!). Essential doctrine, therefore, had to be stated briefly and clearly in order to protect the flock from wolves who would lead Christ's sheep astray.

This pattern is pervasive in the New Testament. The apostles had to state the truth unambiguously in order to protect the church from heresy and harm. This is a pastoral responsibility that has continued in the church throughout the ages. Each time a new heresy has threatened the purity of the truth, the church has had to respond by clearly stating the essential doctrine that Scripture teaches.

For example, in the fourth century the church faced a great crisis when the heretic Arius attacked the doctrine of the eternality and divinity of Christ. Arius said he believed the Bible. He was even trained at one of the best schools of his day and ordained. Yet, thinking he was acting

in the interest of the truth, he denied essential Christian doctrine and led many people astray. Thus, the church responded to this situation by looking carefully at Arius' teachings, and then rightly condemning them as heresy. The church, represented by ecumenical delegates, wrote a creed in response to Arius' doctrine in order to protect believers. That creed is the Nicene Creed.

As heresies arise and attack the church, it is necessary for the church to respond by summarizing particular doctrines in Scripture in order to refute false teaching. This is a charge given to the church. Paul told young Pastor Timothy, "Preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will heap up for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into silly myths" (2 Tim. 4.2-4).

Likewise, the apostle John says, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4.1). Creeds and confessions are an aid to that end. By believing and confessing a clear system of biblical doctrine, the church is better equipped to protect Christ's sheep.

Furthermore, creeds and confessions protect us from ourselves. Each of us reads the Bible with philosophical presuppositions. We are fallen people. We bring baggage to the text we are interpreting. While creeds and confessions do not guarantee that we will have an infallible interpretation of Scripture, they nevertheless provide a safeguard. Like rails upon which a train runs, our confessions keep us on track. Take away the rails, and you have a disaster. Likewise, when an individual Christian tries to read the Bible completely detached from the historic Christian church, and refuses to check his interpretation with what the church has confessed through the ages, he is bound for disaster.

### **III. Creeds & Confessions Provide Instruction on the Essentials**

Creeds and confessions help us "connect the dots" of the Bible. They instruct us on the doctrine which arises from the story of redemption. They are one of the ways the church fulfills her responsibility to "Go...and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that [Christ has] commanded" (Matt. 28.18-20). The church has the responsibility to teach apostolic doctrine, which has been laid as a foundation for our faith (Eph. 2.20). This is why it is named the Apostles' Creed – not because the apostles themselves wrote it, but because it is a faithful expression of apostolic doctrine which Christ commanded his church to teach.

Additionally, this is why the Reformation gave us rich catechisms. The Heidelberg Catechism goes through the Apostles' Creed and explains it, line by line, so that we are instructed in what we believe and why we believe it. It teaches us what God requires of us in each of the Ten Commandments, and what it means to pray each line of the Lord's Prayer. It educates us about

the law and the gospel, and how we are to live in gratitude to God with a life of good works. It organizes biblical doctrine and teaches us in a question and answer format so that we will know the basics of Christianity.

When we understand the creeds, confessions, and catechisms, we should be able to confess them as our own. In 1561-62 the Reformed churches sent a copy of the Belgic Confession to the Roman Catholic King of Spain, Philip II, along with a letter that said that they were ready to obey the government in all lawful things, but that they would “offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to fire” rather than deny the truth expressed in their confession. To the glory of God, and for the good of his church, we should have such a commitment to the truth.

Reformed Christians are confessing Christians. That is to say, they are members of confessional churches that hold to the faith once and for all delivered to the saints and confessed during the Protestant Reformation. In our confession, we are, by God’s grace, “standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1.27).

*Extracted from the Missions Committee Report, URCNA Synod of 2014*