

SERVANT THOUGHTS

Biblical Theology and the Confessing Church¹ Part 2

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Confessional Theology Is the Church's Confession

American egalitarianism has always been especially inhospitable to confessional theology. Until recently confessionalism has taken a back seat even within the Presbyterian and Reformed community. I have already suggested (in part 1) that the Westminster Confession of the Faith should be considered the crown jewel of theological achievement in the post-Reformation era.

Postmodern reaction to Enlightenment rationalism, and to Cartesian equations that boast perfect control over reality, has wrongly associated confessionalism with this mentality. We should reject the modern penchant to impose an artificial pattern on reality. However, the provisionalism of postmoderns, with its understandable aversion to dogmatic certitudes, should be appreciated for its acknowledgement of the limits of human knowing, but not be allowed to deny all certainties.² The post-Reformation theology that systematized biblical truth was a very different enterprise, and, occurred prior to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The pattern the Puritans used to organize their theology was not artificial because they didn't invent it out of thin air and impose it on the church. Rather they discovered what is already in Scripture. This was not, however, done in a confessional vacuum, but built on the creedal wisdom of the church in the past—the church that had also gleaned its categories from the infallible Word of God. This

¹ The substance of this article was originally presented as a lecture at the Kerux Conference, Lynnwood, Washington, May 12, 2005.

² For more on this important theme see Craig Holdrege and Stephen Talbott *Beyond Biotechnology: The Barren Promise of Genetic Engineering*, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2008); *The Virtues of Ignorance: Sustainability and the Limits of Knowledge*, ed. Bill Vitek and Wes Jackson, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2008); and Peter J. Leithart, *Solomon among the Postmoderns* (on Ecclesiastes), (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008).

knowledge was not used as the Enlightenment would use scientific knowledge to distance us from the world in order to control it. Rather, it was used to understand our relationship to God as *he* has revealed himself in Scripture. So Scripture is studied and organized in order to enter into a covenantal relationship with God, his salvation, and his way of living.

The mature coordination of the theological disciplines, especially exegetical, biblical, systematic, and confessional theology, is essential to the recrudescence of confessional consciousness in the modern context. Therefore, we need to develop an apologia for confessions, demonstrating that the Bible itself warrants such articulation of the church's beliefs. Historic Christianity has always been confessional. Not to be so is to insure the eclipse of the truth of the gospel, as David Wells noted over a decade ago, "The word *evangelical*, precisely because it has lost its confessional dimension, has become descriptively anemic."³

The Church Must Teach the Purposes of Its Confession

We should begin to argue for confessional theology by answering the question: Why do we need confessions? The outline of our answer may be found in the following four propositions.⁴

1. Confessions are necessary in order to instruct the church in the truth of Scripture. The confession functions as a road map of the terrain of Scripture, helping us to learn the essential features of the biblical landscape.⁵ The Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms were specifically designed for this purpose. They communicate the doctrines of the Confession to the members of the church.⁶ In turn the preaching and teaching of these doctrines form disciples after

³ David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 134. For a detailed and cogent argument on jettisoning the term *evangelical* see Darryl Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

⁴ A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, (1879; repr., London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), 114.

⁵ Cf. Gregory Edward Reynolds, "The Necessity of a Doctrinal Road Map," *Ordained Servant* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2007): 11-13; http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=32.

⁶ Cf. Darryl Hart, "The Religion of the Catechism," *Ordained Servant* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2007): 73-78; http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=33; Mark A. Garcia, "Pilgrimage in the Mode of Hope: Thoughts on the Usefulness of Catechism," *Ordained Servant* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2007): 79-84; http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=34.

the image of Jesus Christ. Inculcated truth makes worshippers and servants, sanctifying them as the Word is applied by the Spirit of truth (John 13:26; 14:26; 15:26; 16:8). This is why the fourth membership vow in our church is tantamount to confessional membership, although allowing more latitude. It is also why officers must carefully instruct prospective members in the system of doctrine so that they know to what teaching they are being called to submit.

2. Confessions are necessary in order to function as the church's constitution, or as Hodge stated, "To act as the bond of ecclesiastical fellowship among those so nearly agreed as to be able to labor together in harmony."⁷ In this way a confession unites the visible church on the basis of a doctrinal consensus. We should remember, as Peter Wallace points out in his article "Catholicity and Conscience," the ancient church adhered to the ecumenical creeds because there was only one church in several regions of the Roman Empire. These were united in their confession. Individual agendas did not prevail, as we see in point 4 below.⁸

Furthermore, no individual is sufficient unto himself. Peter Wallace summarizes Calvin's attitude in this regard: "Heinrich Bullinger once sent to John Calvin a book he had written with an apologetic comment, suggesting that Calvin really didn't need to read it since he already knew everything in it. Calvin responded with a passionate rejection of Bullinger's attitude. Calvin insisted that he needed Bullinger to keep his own thinking in line. To paraphrase Calvin's letter: 'by myself I'm a heretic.'"⁹ Confessional theology binds the church together as a corporate entity, and so represents a radical challenge to radical individualism.

3. Confessions are necessary in order to record theological progress in the church's history. Hodge said that confessions, "mark, preserve, and disseminate the attainments made in the knowledge of Christian truth by any branch of the church in any grand crisis of its

⁷ Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 114.

⁸ Gregory E. Reynolds, "On Being a Confessional Church," *Ordained Servant* 13:1 (Jan. 2004): 11-13.

⁹ Peter Wallace, "The Presbytery's Role in Shepherding Pastors," *Ordained Servant* 8:3 (July 1999): 59. Cited from *Calvin's Selected Works: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet; vol. 5, ed. Jules Bonnet, trans. David Constable (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 306. Letter to Bullinger, March 12, 1551. "[T]he gifts of the Spirit are so distributed among us, that no one individual is sufficient for himself."

development.”¹⁰ The Trinitarian and Christological controversies of the ancient church served as the anvil upon which the Nicene and Chalcedonian formulations were forged. So the history of creeds is also a history of the development of doctrine, a history of the church’s discernment of the truth of Scripture as it applied to the demands of the times. We must not allow the provisionalism and the relativism of our age to prevent us from at least considering new formulations of doctrine in response to particular errors.

As early as 1936 J. Gresham Machen declared,

We are living in a time of widespread intellectual as well as moral decadence, and the visible church has unfortunately not kept free from this decadence. Christian education has been sadly neglected; learning has been despised; and real meditation has become almost a lost art. For these reasons, and other still more important reasons, I think it is clear that ours is not a creed-making age. Intellectual and moral indolence like ours does not constitute the soil out of which great Christian creeds may be expected to grow.¹¹

Machen predicted that the great outlines of Christian doctrine had probably already been achieved in the Westminster Confession of Faith. However, “all real doctrinal advance proceeds in the direction of greater precision and fullness of doctrinal statement.”¹² Furthermore, “there can be no real progress unless there is something that is fixed.”¹³ Finally, as if Machen were thinking of our own day, he reminds us, “The creeds of Christendom are not expressions of Christian experience. They are summary statements of what God has told us in His Word.”¹⁴ Perhaps the greatest progress we can make in our day is to revive our confessional tradition by cultivating anew a confessional mentality in the church.

4. Confessions are necessary in order to preserve or safeguard apostolic doctrine. Here the subtlety of Hodge illuminates: confessions serve “to discriminate the truth from the glosses of false teachers, and accurately to define it in its integrity and due proportions.”¹⁵ Not only does confessional truth teach doctrinal discrimination, accurately arming the church against false

¹⁰ Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 114.

¹¹ J. Gresham Machen, “The Creeds and Doctrinal Advance,” in *Scripture and Confession: A Book about Confessions Old and New*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 156.

¹² *Ibid.*, 151.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁵ Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 114.

teaching, but positively helps delineate the doctrinal system. Truth has an internal consistency, a pattern, by which the whole is constituted to be more than the sum of its parts. This is the perfect protection against the incursion of special agendas that isolate particular truths, thus distorting the whole. It also warns us against what church historians call the “central dogma” approach to theology. So biblical truth must not be viewed through the lens of any one doctrine, but rather as a whole, the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). As we saw above (in part 1) the doctrine found in Scripture forms a pattern of sound words (2 Tim. 1:8-14).

Church Officers Must Teach the Confessional Identity of the Church

As church officers, especially elders who teach and oversee the ministry of the Word, and most especially ministers of the Word, we must demonstrate the biblical integrity of our Confession and Catechisms in the ministry of the Word. The following are some ways by which we can inculcate a confessional mentality in the church.

Ministers of the Word, should refer to the Confession and Catechisms in sermons, and read appropriate portions in unison with the congregation as a response to the preaching in a confession of faith. Because we normally preach expository sermons (and I hope always textual sermons), by quoting from the Confession and Catechisms we are exhibiting the connection of the historical and doctrinal categories found in the Bible with our creedal documents.

We should also be teaching the Confession and Catechisms in Sunday School and perhaps in the midweek meeting. The Larger Catechism has been largely neglected in recent Presbyterian history. It has a pastoral richness that exceeds both the Confession and the Shorter Catechism. The latter is mnemonically superior, but the longer catechism is pedagogically opulent. In teaching and preaching it is helpful to point out whole phrases from the Confession and Catechisms that are direct quotes from Scripture—there are many. Then, of course, there are the extensive proof texts provided for our Confession and Catechisms. This requires alerting people to the context of these proofs, lest people be misled to believe that the Puritans were naïve about

the redemptive historical and thematic nature of Scripture texts. They were meticulously exegetical in their approach, and for this reason were inclined not to add proof texts until they were required by Parliament.

The children's *First Catechism* and *The Shorter Catechism* are built into our Great Commission Publications curriculum. There are excellent catechetical and teacher resources available at the GCP website.¹⁶

In conclusion, I have attempted to make the case for the place of biblical theology as a theological discipline in our confessional heritage, and in doing so to demonstrate that systematizing doctrine is neither contrary to biblical theology nor to the Bible. As the church studies the Bible, and understands its doctrinal categories in their redemptive historical settings and development, it is compelled by this very enterprise to formally confess what it believes the Bible clearly teaches, in order that the church may stake its life and witness on the glorious certitudes of God's Word.

¹⁶ Great Commission Publications www.gcp.org, catechetical resources www.gcp.org/catechism.asp, teacher resources <http://goteach.gcp.org>. The GCP curriculum is designed as a unified, sequential way of teaching catechism and the history of redemption. There is no other Sunday School curriculum like it.