

The Integrity of Words and Our Confession of Faith

by

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In the beginning was the Word. Christians rightly cherish the declaration that our Savior, the crucified and resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, is first known as the Word — the one whom the Father has sent to communicate and to accomplish our redemption. We are saved because the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Believers are then assigned the task of telling others about the salvation that Christ has brought, and this requires the use of words. We tell the story of Jesus by deploying words, and we cannot tell the story without them. Our testimony, our teaching, and our theology all require the use of words. Words are essential to our worship, our preaching, our singing, and our spiritual conversation. In other words, words are essential to the Christian faith and central in the lives of believers.

As Martin Luther rightly observed, the church house is to be a “mouth house” where words, not images or dramatic acts, stand at the center of the church’s attention and concern. We live by words and we die by words.

Truth, life, and health are found in the right words. Lies, disaster, and death are found in the wrong words. The Apostle Paul warned Timothy, “If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.” [1 Timothy 6:3-5]

Later, Paul will instruct Timothy that sound words come to us in a revealed pattern. “Follow the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.” [2 Timothy 1:13-14]

Theological education is a deadly serious business. The stakes are so high. A

theological seminary that serves faithfully will be a source of health and life for the church, but an unfaithful seminary will set loose a torrent of trouble, untruth, and sickness upon Christ's people. Inevitably, the seminaries are the incubators of the church's future. The teaching imparted to seminarians will shortly be inflicted upon congregations, where the result will be either fruitfulness or barrenness, vitality or lethargy, advance or decline, spiritual life, or spiritual death.

Sadly, the landscape is littered with theological institutions that have poorly taught and have been poorly led. Theological liberalism has destroyed scores of seminaries, divinity schools, and other institutions for the education of the ministry. Many of these schools are now extinct, even as the churches they served have been evacuated. Others linger on, committed to the mission of revising the Christian faith in order to make peace with the spirit of the age. These schools intentionally and boldly deny the pattern of sound words in order to devise new words for a new age — producing a new faith. As J. Gresham Machen rightly observed almost a century ago, we do not really face two rival versions of Christianity. We face Christianity on the one hand and, on the other hand, some other religion that selectively uses Christian words, but is not Christianity.

How does this happen? Rarely does an institution decide, in one comprehensive moment of decision, to abandon the faith and seek after another. The process is far more dangerous and subtle. A direct institutional evasion would be instantly recognized and corrected, if announced honestly at the onset. Instead, theological disaster usually comes by means of drift and evasion, shading and equivocation. Eventually, the drift accumulates into momentum and the school abandons doctrine after doctrine, truth claim after truth claim, until the pattern of sound words, and often the sound words themselves, are mocked, denied, and cast aside in the spirit of theological embarrassment.

As James Petigru Boyce, founder of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, argued, “It is with a single man that error usually commences.” When he wrote those words in 1856, he knew that pattern by observation of church history. All too soon, he would know this sad truth by personal observation.

By the time Southern Baptists were ready to establish a theological seminary,

many schools for the training of ministers had already been lost to theological liberalism. Included among these were both Harvard and Yale, even as Yale had been envisioned, at least in part, as a corrective to Harvard. Theological concessions in theological seminaries had already weakened the Baptists of the North. Drawing upon the lessons of the past, Southern Baptists were determined to establish schools bound by covenant and constitution to a confession of faith — to the pattern of sound words.

Confessional seminaries require professors to sign a statement of faith, designed to safeguard by explicit theological summary. The sad experience of fallen and troubled schools led Southern Baptists to require that faculty members must teach in accordance with the confession of faith, and not contrary to anything therein. Added to this were warnings against any private understanding with a professor, or any hesitation or mental reservation. Teachers in a confessional school not only pledge by sacred covenant to teach “in accordance with and not contrary to” the confession of faith, but to do so gladly, eagerly, and totally.

We are living in an anti-confessional age. Our society and its reigning academic culture are committed to individual autonomy and expression, as well as to an increasingly relativistic conception of truth. The language of higher education is overwhelmingly dominated by claims of academic freedom, rather than academic responsibility. In most schools, a confession of faith is an anathema, not just an anachronism. But, among us, a confession of faith must be seen as a gift and covenant. It is a sacred trust that guards revealed truths. A confession of faith never stands above the Bible, but the Bible itself mandates concern for the pattern of sound words.

Theologian Russell Reno has noted that confessions of faith serve a dual purpose — to define truth and to isolate falsehood:

“The impulse behind confessions of faith is doxological, the desire to speak the truth about God, to give voice to the beauty of holiness in the fullest possible sense. However, the particular forms that historical confessions take are shaped by confrontation. Their purpose is to respond to the spirit of the age by re-articulating in a pointed way the specific content of Christianity so as to face new challenges as well as new forms of old challenges. As a result, formal confessions are characterized by pointed distinctions. They are exercises in drawing

boundaries where the particular force of traditional Christian claims is sharpened to heighten the contrast between true belief and false belief As they shape our faith, confessions structure our identities.”

Confessions structure our identities. If not, they are useless. Within a theological seminary, the confession must function as a living commitment, not as a dead letter. As Reno notes, confessions are characterized by pointed distinctions. They are exercises in drawing boundaries, addressing new heresies and new forms of old heresies. False teachings are always around us. Our task is to make certain that they do not take hold among us.

For many denominations, churches, and seminaries, confessions of faith are kept as references to a faith once believed, but available only in the present as a remembrance of things past. Among us, the confession must guard the faith once for all delivered to the saints as a living faith.

Southern Baptists learned these lessons the hardest way, and we have paid the price of theological controversy for the sake of recovering that which was lost. By God’s grace, we have been granted a recovery, if we will keep it. Now, a new generation must take up this responsibility in the face of new challenges, knowing that these challenges, like the denial of biblical inerrancy, will require the full force of conviction to confront, and the full force of confession to contain.

We must look to a new generation of teachers who will gladly teach in accordance with and not contrary to all that is affirmed in our confession of faith, without hesitation or mental reservation. We must pray for an army of theological teachers ready to do battle with the spirit of the age and, at the same time, to offer a glad defense of the hope that is in us, with gentleness and respect. We must look to professors who will be determined to stand with the apostles and the saints of God throughout the ages in the sacred democracy of the dead that points to doctrinal fidelity.

Faithfulness will be found in the stewardship of words, in the pattern of sound words revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and in the teaching that accords with godliness. There can be no lasting fidelity without confessional integrity.

The ultimate purpose of confessional integrity is indeed doxological — to make certain that we rightly worship and love God. The confession guards the sound words of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and is thus essential to missions and evangelism.

As Fanny Crosby taught us to sing: “Tell me the story of Jesus, write on my heart every word; tell me the story most precious, sweetest that ever was heard.

In the end, theological education--and preaching--is all about the stewardship of words. So it was when Paul commissioned Timothy. So is it now.

“Follow the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.” [2 Timothy 1:13-14]

May those words serve as the *Magna Carta* of theological education and the teaching ministry of the church. May the church faithfully teach, even as it is faithfully taught, until Jesus comes.

For more information on Southern Seminary, visit SBTS.edu and for more information on Boyce College, visit BoyceCollege.com.

This article appears on [R. Albert Mohler, Jr.'s](#) website.