

The History & Theology of Creeds

by

Roger Nicole

“Any religion that boasts of being creedless is either misrepresenting the facts or writing its own epitaph.”

One look at W. L. Lumpkin’s *Baptist Confessions of Faith* shows clearly how inept is the statement often heard nowadays: “*Baptists are not a creedal people!*” In fact they may well have produced more creeds than any other Christian denomination.

Every person has a natural desire to express the major features of his or her conviction in a pithy and perhaps even catchy formula. This was true among the Jewish people before Christ, who confessed the Shema: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deut. 6:4). This is true of the Muslim who recites, “Allah is the only God and Mohammed is His prophet.”

In the New Testament, we find a number of such condensed expressions of the faith: “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor. 12:3); “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16); “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28); “There is one body and one Spirit ... one hope ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:4–6); “Maranatha” (1 Cor. 16:22).

The Early Church

Beyond the New Testament times we find that the Christians used the symbol of a fish to recognize one another. This was an acrostic for “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior.” Catechumens recited more ample declarations at the close of their training period, often at the time of baptism for those who had come to faith beyond infancy.

One can find traces of these declarations in the writings of early fathers. At the Council of Nicaea in 325 a.d., Eusebius of Caesarea proposed an ancient baptismal creed of his church as a means of resolving the Arian controversy. It is this creed, with certain modifications intended to screen out Arianism, which became the Nicene creed. With further modifications, most notably the extension of the article on the Holy Spirit, this became, on or about 381, a statement widely received in Eastern and Western churches, including many Protestant bodies.

In the West, by a slow process of accretions and deletions, the confession known as the Apostles' Creed emerged in its final form late in the fifth century. In 451 the Formula of Chalcedon was framed, designed to crystallize the doctrine of the two natures in the one person of Christ. This too has enjoyed very wide ecumenical acceptance.

The Reformation

In the 16th century, the impulse of the Reformation generated a tremendous activity in confessional writing. Until 1545 confessions were focused mainly on defining Protestant doctrine over against Roman Catholic views. This is true of the Augsburg Confession (1530), the Apology (1530), and the Articles of Smalcald (1537) in the Lutheran church; and of the Zwinglian documents (1523–1531), the first confession of Basel (1534), and the Tetrapolitan Confession (1530) in the Reformed churches.

The Catechisms of Luther (1529) and Calvin (1541), on the other hand, were intended to provide instruction on the Christian faith and life as a whole. So were Calvin's Confession of the Church of Geneva (1536) and the second Basel Confession (1536), also known as the First Helvetic Confession.

In the Lutheran Church, the Formula of Concord (1576) was designed to bring to a close several internal controversies and to define the Lutheran view over against the Reformed position.

This period was one of great flowering for Reformed Confessions. The Gallican Confession, drafted by Calvin and revised as the Synod of LaRoche (1559), is still in force in France. Its twin, the Belgic Confession (1661), is one of the three formulas of unity acknowledged by the Reformed Church of the Netherlands and the various churches issued from it in which the name *Reformed* was preserved. In 1563 the 42 articles prepared by Cranmer for the Church of England in the reign of Edward VII (1553) were reduced to 39 by the elimination of seven articles and the introduction of four new ones.

In the year 1556, the Second Helvetic Confession, written earlier by H. Bullinger as a personal statement, was adopted in the Swiss cantons where it is still in force.

The first Scotch Confession of faith of 1560 viewed as especially repugnant the church of Rome's doctrine that permitted women to administer baptism in

emergencies. The second Scotch Confession is also known as the National Covenant of 1580 and constitutes a strong anti-Catholic manifesto.

In Hungary two extremely long Confessions were drafted in 1562, one of which was patterned after a Confession written by Beza, intended for his father and first published in 1558.

To this period belongs the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) that may with good reason be viewed as the most successful of all Reformed catechisms. It is still in very general use in Reformed churches.

The Post-Reformation Era

The 17th century was a period of synthesis in which the scriptural truths asserted in earlier confessions were often presented in a more systematic way so that their mutual relationships could be more clearly discerned.

Here belong the Irish Articles of religion (1615), composed by archbishop J. Ussher.

The Canons of the Synod of Dort (1619) constitute an international statement of the five points of Calvinism on the doctrine of grace.

Especially noteworthy are the Westminster Standards (1647) including the Westminster Confession of Faith, perhaps the most discerning and equipoised of all Reformed statements; the Shorter Catechism, of deserved world repute; and the Larger Catechism, which is a detailed expression of Reformed doctrine and ethics.

The Westminster Confession, with certain slight modifications and two important additions probably due to the pen of John Owen, spawned the “Savoy declaration” (1658), representing the faith of Congregationalism.

In 1677 the Particular Baptists also modeled their statement on the Westminster Confession and the Savoy Declaration, producing the Second London Confession of Faith. It was republished in 1688 and 1689. This text, with some modifications because of the different political situation in the United States, was adopted by the Philadelphia Association of Baptist Churches in 1742 and is therefore often called the Philadelphia Confession of Faith. One look at W. L. Lumpkin’s *Baptist Confessions of Faith* shows clearly how inept is the statement often heard nowadays: “Baptists are not a creedal people!” In fact they may well have produced more creeds than any other Christian denomination.

For Better and for Worse

Confessions contain great theological significance, but entailed in them can be both advantages and possible dangers. The advantages are:

1. Confessions serve as important articulations of the way some people or bodies understand the teaching of Scripture. As such they identify the confessors.
2. Confessions serve to bring together people of diverse origins by providing a basis on which all can agree. As such they unify the confessors.
3. Such statements of faith set apart people and views at variance with sound doctrine as held within the ranks. They discriminate the nonconfessors.
4. And confessions serve as the basis for instruction of the young or those unacquainted with the tenets of the church. This is the main purpose for catechisms—they instruct those who would be confessors.

Here are some possible dangers of creeds:

1. They can become substitutes for the Scriptures, instead of guides for biblical understanding. It should always be confessed that confessions are subordinate to the Bible, the supreme norm of the faith. In the minds of the confessors, then, confessions should always be subject to correction based on a proper appeal to Scripture.
2. Creeds can focus too much attention on the doctrinal contents of the Christian faith to the neglect of other important aspects—ethics, spirituality, Christian action, and the like.
3. Confessions can constitute barriers preventing collaboration or even union of churches by an undue emphasis on matters that should not precipitate division.

These dangers, of course, do not militate against confessional statements as such. The risks can be, and often are, avoided by wise supporters of the various confessions.

Creeds distill, crystallize, and synthesize the teachings of Scripture. Those who oppose them give the impression that they resent the light a clear formulation casts upon their own indecisiveness—or even their heretical tendencies. As Paul Scherer wrote in *For We Have This Treasure*, “Any religion that boasts of being creedless is either misrepresenting the facts or

writing its own epitaph.”

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