

A PLEA FOR CREEDS

R. Hanko

Creed or Chaos

There is an essay by a well-known British author of this century entitled, "Creed or Chaos."¹ While not agreeing with much of the content of the essay, the title very nicely describes the urgency of having and using the historic creeds of the church. We are convinced that the only alternative to creeds is ecclesiastical chaos. History has proved that, especially in this century. In refusing to have creeds or in moving away from her creeds the church has exposed herself to the chaos that the floods and winds of doctrinal change, spiritual ignorance, and worldliness bring.

Some have begun to realise this and to return to the creeds, and for this we are profoundly thankful. Others, however, continue to neglect and despise the creeds, and it is to them especially that this article is addressed in the hope they will reconsider and see both the Biblical basis and the need for creeds in the church.

It is that Biblical basis that we hope to establish first of all. Then we wish also to address some of the objections that are raised against creeds. Finally, having established and defended the necessity of creeds, we wish to point out some of the specific uses of creeds in the church, for unless the creeds are known and used, having them is of no value.

Confessing Our Faith

In order to see that the use of creeds is Biblical, we must remember that "creed" is from a Latin word which means, "I believe." That tells us what creeds are. They are an expression of the faith that lives in the hearts of God's people. In the creeds, believers, usually as a body, tell the world what they believe the Word of God teaches. Creeds, then, do not exist apart from Scripture or over against it, but are simply a confession of what believers find in the Word of God. And what they find in the Word of God, they confess.

In having creeds, therefore, believers are only doing what the Word of God itself commands them to do - confessing their faith. For this reason the creeds are often called "confessions." So it is here first of all, in the fact that creeds are confessions, that we find a Biblical basis for having them.

There are any number of passages that command believers to confess their faith. In Matthew 10:32 Jesus makes this very necessary when He says: "Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven." Romans 10:9, 10 connect our confessing Christ with salvation: "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."

In confessing their faith in creeds believers are only doing in unison what Nathanael did when he said, "Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel" (Jn. 1:49), or what Peter did when he said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). In recording their confession they are only doing what Scripture itself does in recording such confessions as these.

That they are required by Scripture to make a common confession is also clear. In Romans 15:6 the Apostle Paul prays that the members of the church in Rome might "with one mind and *one mouth* glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." In I Corinthians

¹Dorothy Sayers, *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World*, pp. 31-45 (Eerdmans, 1969).

2:10 the Word of God commands believers that they all "speak the same thing." Not only that, but in the context (vs. 2) they are commanded to do this "with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord." This, as far as we are able to see, can only be done by way of creeds.²

This is exactly the way in which creeds are justified by those who have written them. In the preface to his "Confession,"³ for example, John Knox says:

For we are most certainly persuaded that whosoever denies Christ Jesus, or is ashamed of Him, in the presence of men, shall be denied before the Father, and before His holy angels (p. 342).

It is really impossible to be without creeds. Every believer believes something about what the Word of God teaches. And insofar as that faith is precious to him he confesses it. He really cannot do otherwise, if he loves Christ and loves the Word. Everyone and every church has a creed whether it is written down or not. Even in those churches that reject creeds there is a creed which has there as much force and authority as the written creeds do in churches that have them.

Likewise, those who use the slogan, "No creed but Christ," will very quickly be found to have quite an extensive "creed" or belief, not only about Christ. Ask them, for example, which Christ they confess - the Christ of the liberals who is only an example to believers and who did not shed His blood for their sins, the Christ of the Mormons or of the Jews, or of the Romish church. Thankfully, you will find that their creeds includes a great deal of sound Biblical teaching about Christ and His work.

You also find that their *creed*, their belief, includes much more than a confession of Christ. Though they have no written creeds and say "No creed but Christ," they do not really hold to what they say. Try, for example, to teach the Biblical doctrines of election or of limited atonement in many such churches. You will be politely but firmly told, "We do not *believe* that here," that is, "It is not part of our *creed*." Or, ask to have an infant baptised in most such churches, and you will be shown the door. "We do not *believe*," you will hear as you leave, "in infant baptism."

The American Presbyterian, Samuel Miller, not only confirms the truth of this, but shows that such churches, in spite of their opposition to creeds, really do have them and require subscription to them. He says:

The only further argument in support of creeds on which I shall dwell is that their most zealous opposers to themselves virtually emply them in all ecclesiastical proceedings. . . . Did any one ever hear of a Unitarian congregation engaging as their pastor a preacher of Calvinism, knowing him to be such (Unitarians are notorious for their opposition to creedal subscription, RH)? But why not, on the principle adopted, or at least professed by Unitarians? The Calvinist surely comes with his Bible in his hand, and professes to believe it as cordially as they. Why is that not enough? yet we know that, in fact, it is not enough for these advocates of unbounded liberality. Before they will consent to receive him as their spiritual guide they must be explicitly informed how he interprets the Bible: in other words, what is his particular creed; whether it is substantially the same with their own or not; and if they are not satisfied that this is the case, all other

²John Hooper, *Biblical Church Unity* (unpublished).

³John Knox, *The History of the Reformation in Scotland* (with appendices), pp. 341-362 (Fleming H. Revell, 1905).

professions and protestations will be in vain. He will be inexorably rejected. Here, then, we have, in all its extent, the principle of demanding subscription to a creed - and a principle carried out into practice as rigorously as ever it was by the most high-toned advocate of orthodoxy.⁴

The Work of the Spirit in the Church

The second way of demonstrating the necessity and importance of creeds is by way of reference to the promise of Jesus in John 16:13: "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will show you things to come." This promise of Jesus is fulfilled as the Holy Spirit gives God's people the ability to understand the Word of God.

The creeds are one of the fruits of that work of the Spirit. To deny the usefulness of creeds and their place in the church is to deny that the Spirit of truth has worked in the church of the past, or at least to deny that His work has any relevance for the church today. By so doing the church today cuts herself off from the church of the past, denying the fundamental unity of the church in all ages. This is one of the great weaknesses of the church today, that she has no ties to the church of the past - does not know the history and lessons of the past, nor the battles the church has fought, nor God's faithfulness to His church through all the ages. She tries to stand completely on her own against the forces of evil, instead of seeing herself as part of that great "army with banners" that is "fair as the moon, clear as the sun" (Song 6:10).

Not only that, but by cutting herself off from the church of past, the church today says in effect that every generation must start all over in its searching of the Scriptures and pursuit of the truth. Thus she sets herself an impossible task - a task that is either set aside as too great so that there is little knowledge of the truth in the church, or which leaves her no time for other things.

This is well-stated by the Presbyterian author, G.I. Williamson:

The Bible contains a great wealth of information. It isn't easy to master it all - in fact, no one has ever mastered it completely. It would therefore be foolish for us to try to do it on our own, starting from scratch. We would be ignoring all the study of the Word of God that other people have done down through the centuries. That is exactly why we have creeds. They are the product of many centuries of Bible study by a great company of believers. They are a kind of spiritual "road map" of the teaching of the Bible, already worked out and proved by others before us. And, after all, isn't this exactly what Jesus promised? When he was about to finish his work on earth, he made this promise to his disciples: "*When He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth*" (John 16:13). And Christ kept his promise. When the Day of Pentecost came, he sent his Spirit to dwell in his people. The Holy Spirit was poured out - not on individuals, each by himself, but on the whole body of Christian believers together (Acts 2). And from that time until this, he has been giving his church an understanding of the Scriptures. It is no wonder that the church expressed itself from very early times through creeds (p. 3).⁵

He adds:

And right here we see one of the most important things about a creed that

⁴Samuel Miller, *Doctrinal Integrity*, p. 26 (Prebyterian Heritage Publications, 1989).

⁵G. I. Williamson, *The Heidelberg Catechism* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1993).

is true to the Bible - it remains true down through the ages. It does not need to be changed again and again, with each generation, because it deals with things that are unchanging. Thus, an accurate creed binds the generations together. It reminds us that the church of Jesus Christ is not confined to one age, just as it is not confined to any one place. In other words, there is a unity in what Christians have believed, right down through the ages. Just think of it: when we confess our faith together . . . we join with all those believers who have gone before us. Does not this demonstrate that there is indeed just one Lord and one true faith? (p. 3).

The Importance of Doctrine

The third line of reasoning in defense of creeds makes reference to II Timothy 3:16, 17, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." It is the reference to doctrine that is important here.

Strictly speaking, Scripture is not doctrine (the *systematic* exposition of the truths of Scripture *in their relation to one another*). This is implied in II Timothy 3:16 in that Scripture is said to be profitable *for* doctrine. And we should notice, too, that doctrine is the *first* thing that Scripture is profitable for. Creeds are doctrine. They take all the passages of Scripture regarding a certain teaching and put them together into a statement of that doctrine and then show also how that doctrine relates to others. They are, doctrinally, a "setting in order of those things which are most surely believed among us" (Lk. 1:1).

Now it ought to be evident to everyone that a good part of the opposition to creeds is rooted in the fact that doctrine is very unpopular today. In spite of II Timothy 3:16, 17 there is neither teaching of nor interest in doctrine any more, and so the creeds, which are statements of doctrine are either despised or set aside.

If Scripture is profitable for doctrine, then the church does right in setting forth doctrine in her creeds. If doctrine is as important as the Word indicates, then the church ought to have such doctrinal statements.

Objections to Creeds

Some of the objections that are raised against creeds we have already dealt with, but there are other, more important objections, as well. Some say that having creeds denies the unique authority of Scripture, and that the creeds, in fact, take us away from Scripture and lead to the neglect of Scripture in the church. Others say that creeds cause division in the church of Christ, even that they are the primary cause of division between Christians. Both of these objections are easily answered.

As far as the authority of Scripture is concerned, the creeds when properly used neither push aside the authority of Scripture nor draw Christians away from Scripture. Rather, they point to the Scriptures and serve as a kind of "map" of the teaching of the Word. This they do especially by the numerous references to Scripture that are found in most creeds. No doubt there are a few who attach too much authority to the creeds, but the creeds themselves claim that Scripture is the only authority and show it is by referring to it.

From that point of view they do the same thing that the preaching does - they compel believers to search the Scriptures to see if the things taught in them are true (cf. Acts 17:11). Like a map they even show where to begin in searching the Scriptures. Indeed, in our experience, it is in those churches that do not have or use creeds, where there is appalling ignorance of the teaching of Scripture. People sit for years in such churches and never seem to learn anything.

That creeds cause division in the church is another red herring. The creeds do not cause

the divisions that do exist in the church, but only recognise those that are already there. In fact, insofar as the creeds do teach the truth of Scripture (and we have the promise of Jesus in John 16:13 that they do, though not perfectly), the creeds instead of causing division promote unity. It is, of course, the truth that brings unity. We learn that from Amos 3:3, "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" We learn it also from Ephesians 4:15-16; "But *speaking the truth* in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying (building up) of itself in love." The existing divisions, therefore, are not caused by creeds but by a failure to know and submit to the truth. It is the lie that divides, not the truth.

The Usefulness of Creeds

That brings us to speak of the usefulness of creeds, since the very first and one of the more important uses is what might be called their constitutional or unifying use. The creeds of a church are her "banner displayed because of the truth" (Ps. 60:4), and serve as a rallying point for all those who make the same confession of the truth. Thus, the creeds of the Reformed churches are sometimes referred to as the "Three Forms of Unity."

Closely related is the apologetic use of the creeds. Apologetics is the defense of the truth of the gospel (the "answer" in I Peter 3:15 is the Greek word "apology"). This apologetic use of the creeds follows from the fact that most creeds were written in defense of the truth of God's Word. They are the "answer" that the church has given to those who have denied her hope. They were not written in some ivory tower but on the battlefield of faith. And, the errors they address are still around today. There is nothing new under the sun. So too the Scripture passages they reference help us find a Biblical answer when we must stand in defense of the faith.

Then there is also what could be called their juridical use, that is, they are useful in settling and avoiding disputes. They are useful in settling disputes because they show what Scripture teaches, bringing together the teaching of all Scripture on a certain matter. They are useful in avoiding disputes because they set forth the things that are important, thus steering clear of "foolish and unlearned questions" that gender strife (II Tim. 2:23).

Very important is the catechetical use of the creeds. By this we mean that they are used to teach the truth to children and to new converts. They are useful in this respect because they teach the doctrines of Scripture. Anyone who has done any teaching knows that it is almost impossible to learn anything unless the teaching is systematic and carefully arranged in its logical relations. This the creeds do, especially the catechisms which were designed for teaching both young and old.

The creeds can even be used pastorally. They are not cold, abstract statements, but warm, practical expositions of the truth and can be used to direct the attention of those who are in need of pastoral counsel to the Word of God. A good example is the application of the doctrine of predestination in the Canons of Dort, I, 13:

The sense and certainty of this election afford to the children of God additional matter for daily humiliation before him, for adoring the depth of his mercies, for cleansing themselves, and rendering grateful returns of ardent love to him, who first manifested so great love towards them. The consideration of this doctrine of election is so far from encouraging remissness in the observance of the divine commands, or from sinking men in carnal security, that these, in the just judgment of God, are the usual effects of rash presumption, or of idle and wanton trifling with the grace of election, in those who refuse to walk in the ways of the elect.

Several other uses of lesser importance are the homiletical and the liturgical. Some

churches, by way of insuring that the whole counsel of God is preached in the church (Acts 20:27), follow in the preaching at least one service each Lord's Day, the teaching of a particular creed. In this way all the doctrines of the faith are set forth in the church and the people of God well grounded in the truth. This is the homiletical (having to do with sermon making) use. In other churches the creeds, usually the shorter creeds like the Apostle's or Nicene Creeds are recited as part of the worship of the church. In this way believers make mutual confession of their faith in obedience to Christ's command in Matthew 10.

There are, we believe, other uses of the creeds as well, but these are the most important. And even they can be summarised as James Bannerman summarises them in his important book, *The Church of Christ*. He speaks of a three-fold function of creeds - holding the truth, teaching the truth, and witnessing in behalf of the truth.

What needs to be emphasised, however, is that the creeds are of value ONLY if they are used. If they are just matters of the church archives and are left to gather dust in the church, there is no profit at all in having them. Nevertheless, it is necessary to have and use them, as we have shown. The alternative is ecclesiastical chaos, the kind of chaos that is destroying the church today, making her witness ineffective and troubling the lives of her members.

In Jeremiah 6:16, the Lord himself says: "Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls." The church today says, "We will not walk therein." Thus, she has no rest, for she has no old ways.