

Confessing the Faith and Confessions of Faith

TO THE PUZZLEMENT (REAL OR pretended) of some of our dialogue partners of other ecclesiastical traditions, the Reformed family has spawned not one but many confessions of faith. More than sixty such documents were devised during the sixteenth century, and the high degree of mutual consistency between them is a tribute to those theologians who energetically commuted between the Reformed centres of Europe, and corresponded with one another in Latin, the language common to scholars of the time. The Reformed are not alone in having produced numerous confessions of faith: the Baptists, for example, were not dilatory in this matter.¹ It is more than likely, however, that more such documents have emerged from Reformed circles during the past century than from any other quarter.²

Confessions of faith embody doctrinal propositions which their authors hold to be true. At their best they achieve clarity, and there is much to be said for this. They are, moreover, corporate affirmations; they announce the things “commonly believed among us.” Again, they are, in the language of J. L. Austin, performative statements, for confessing is something that we *do*. Thus sentences beginning, “I/We believe . . .” are in the same category as sentences beginning, “I/We promise . . .” Confessions of faith also serve as doctrinal boundary-markers both explicitly, as when they counter the claims of Rome, for example, and implicitly,

1. See Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*.
2. Some of these are to be found in Vischer, *Reformed Witness Today*.

as when they do not affirm universalism or Arminianism. We might say that, like the Chalcedonian Formula of 451 with its four famous adverbs denying Arianism, docetism, and the like, confessions of faith erect doctrinal road blocks against untoward doctrines. As P. T. Forsyth observed, “There must surely be in every positive religion some point where it may so change as to lose its identity and become another religion.”³ At the same time, Forsyth elsewhere reminds us that “Revelation did not come in a statement, but in a person”; but he immediately adds, “Faith . . . must be capable of statement, else it could not be spread; for it is not an ineffable, incommunicable mysticism.”⁴ In all of this we see both the importance of doctrinal affirmation, and are cautioned against elevating our confessional statements which, at most, are subordinate standards, above the One to whom they bear witness. If we forget that confessions of faith are subordinate we are on the way to idolatry; if we forget that they are standards, heresy may beckon.

Before proceeding further I wish to state something which is so obvious that only the most hard-line and blinkered of confessional purists would overlook it: formal confessions of faith are not the only means by which the Reformed have made, and continue to make, corporate confessional affirmations. For example, I have argued that the English Congregational branch of the Reformed family probably developed more ways of corporately confessing the faith than any other strand of that tradition.⁵ In addition to their *Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order* (1658) and subsequent documents,⁶ they sang their faith in the words of their pioneer hymns writers, Isaac Watts, Philip Doddridge, and others; they identified with the corporate confession when “giving in” their experience at their local Church Meeting prior to their reception as communicant members; they heard rehearsals of the orthodox faith in the personal

3. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority*, 219. Forsyth (1848–1921) served five pastorates over a period of twenty-five years, and was Principal of Hackney [Congregational] College from 1901 until his death. Strongly emphasizing the centrality of the cross, he was, in my opinion, the most stimulating British theologian of the twentieth century. See further, Sell, *Testimony and Tradition*, chs. 7 and 8; Sell, *Nonconformist Theology in the Twentieth Century*.

4. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 15. Cf. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, 239.

5. Sell, *Dissenting Thought*, ch. 1.

6. For which see Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*; Vischer, *Reformed Witness Today*, 109–61.

confessions their ministers were required to produce at ordination and induction services; and they signed the locally devised covenant.

The phrase “locally devised” reminds us that these covenants were frequently contextually influenced. For example, that of Angel Street Congregational Church, Worcester, the scene of my second pastorate, was written in 1687, and it is unusually strongly trinitarian in doctrine.⁷ Why? Because already in that district some of the Presbyterian brethren were flirting with “Arianism.” A moral question, rather than a doctrinal one, was of concern to the saints at the seaside town of Ramsgate. In 1767 they wished to call the Reverend David Bradberry to be their minister. He had been converted under the preaching of George Whitefield, and he said that he would accept the pastorate only if a strictly Calvinistic covenant were devised. The Church Meeting promptly set about agreeing such a statement. It comprised nine clauses, of which the first eight were Calvinistic, while the ninth, clearly contextually-inspired, denounced “the infamous practice of smuggling” as contrary to civil law and God’s word. Following Bradberry’s departure some years later, the Church Meeting gathered again to rescind clause nine because it had served only to encourage deception and hypocrisy!⁸ Again, in 1786 the villagers of Bluntisham, relying upon God’s grace, covenanted, among other things, “not to countenance the works of darkness such as Adultery, Fornication, Uncleaness, Murder, Drunkenness and such like. And not to frequent public places of amusement such as Horse-racing, Playhouses, Dancing, Cardplaying, Gaming, nor to frequent Ale-houses . . .” but rather to “come out from amongst them, and have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but reprove them.”⁹

But if such local covenants were, to a greater or lesser degree, contextually-inspired and diverse as to their contents, so were more widely-owned Reformed confessions. This is precisely what we should expect, given that in the first instance confessions of faith are not texts for later students to ponder, they are acts of confessing by Christian communities in particular times and places. We hear the gospel and confess the faith where God has placed us, or not at all. But this means that confessional documents are necessarily time-bound, and this can raise problems for

7. See Noake, *Worcester Sects*, 111–14.

8. See Hurd, *These Three Hundred Years*, 4.

9. See Dixon, *A Century of Village Nonconformity*, 157.

PART ONE: Confessing the Faith in Context

subsequent confessors.¹⁰ There are the related issues of method, content and use. I shall examine each of these in turn.

I

As to method, we may reflect upon the starting-points of a selection of Reformed confessions. Thus, for example, the authors of the *First Confession of Basel* (1534) set out from a strong statement of belief in the Holy Trinity, as do *The Confession of the English Congregation in Geneva* (1556) and the *Scots Confession* (1560). By contrast, the *Second Basel Confession*, published in 1536, only two years after the first, begins with Holy Scripture and, when it finally comes, in its sixth clause, to God, it omits reference to the Holy Spirit. The *Geneva Confession* (1536) opens with a brief paragraph on the Bible, proceeds to God as our only Saviour, comes in paragraphs six and seven to Jesus, and in paragraph eight to the Holy Spirit as regenerator (only). All of which is to say that there is not a strong trinitarian claim here; rather, the trinitarian position is reached by a process of induction. The *French Confession* (1559) opens with a list of God's communicable and incommunicable attributes, but there follow four further paragraphs before we reach the Trinity, and a similar pattern is adopted in the *Belgic Confession* (1561, revised 1619). The *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566) does not begin from God as such, but from a confession of belief in the Scriptures as his Word, and comes to the Trinity in chapter three.¹¹ This procedure is followed in the *Westminster Confession* (1647) in which, as I have elsewhere pointed out,¹² we have to wait for the eight lines on the triune God until we have waded through ten paragraphs on the Bible, including a list of all the biblical books, and two paragraphs on the attributes of God. Clearly, the methods adopted by the authors of a number of classical Reformed confessions were influenced by medieval discussions of the divine attributes and/or by their Reformation context in which the openness to God's authoritative Word took precedence over any ecclesiastical authoritarianisms.

10. See further Sell, *Aspects of Christian Integrity*, 88–92; Sell, *Confessing and Commending the Faith*, 27–29.

11. For the confessions so far mentioned in this paragraph see Cochrane. *Reformed Confessions*.

12. Sell, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel*, 163–64. This *Confession* has been reprinted numerous times.

We may nevertheless ask whether we should necessarily remain content with a pattern in which scholastic lists of attributes, or convictions concerning the Book precede convictions concerning the triune God's grace. The underlying issue is the degree to which the classical confessions are intended as testimonies of faith (*fiducia*) or as mini-systematic treatises to which we are invited to give assent (*assensus*). Are they to be construed experimentally or cerebrally? It seems to be the case that some at least of the documents referred to have mixed objectives. I shall return to this point in due course. In the meantime, I would simply note with Forsyth that "The Bible . . . never demands faith in itself as a preliminary of faith in Christ,"¹³ and that "The triune God . . . is what makes Christianity Christian."¹⁴

Turning now to later Reformed confessions we find even greater methodological variety. The *Articles of Faith of the Presbyterian Church of England* (1890)¹⁵ set out from the triune God and deal with the Bible in the nineteenth of twenty-four paragraphs. The Presbyterian Church of Canada's confession (1984)¹⁶ likewise opens in a strongly trinitarian way, as do those of the United Church of Christ (1959)¹⁷ and the Cumberland and Second Cumberland Presbyterian Churches.¹⁸ On the other hand, the creed of the United Church of Canada (1968, revised 1980) begins and ends with the anthropocentric assertion that "We are not alone . . ."¹⁹ Can this be a product of a tendency in an affluent society towards "feel-good" religion? Be that as it may, Forsyth's cautionary words merit attention: "[A] creed which starts from the glory of God has more power for man's welfare than one that is founded on the welfare of man alone."²⁰

Before leaving the question of method, the hermeneutics of those who devised the classical confessions must be noted. I have already said

13. Forsyth, "Revelation and the person of Christ," in *Faith and Criticism*, 135.

14. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, 263.

15. The Presbyterian Church of England was constituted in 1876 on the union of the Presbyterian Church in England (1842), which included Church of Scotland immigrants and the remnant of old English Presbyterianism which had not gone Congregationalist or Unitarian by the end of the eighteenth century, with the English Synod of the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland (1863).

16. Anon., *Living Faith*.

17. Vischer, *Reformed Witness Today*, 197–218.

18. Anon., *Confession of Faith and Government*.

19. *Reformed Witness Today*, 193–96.

20. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, 83.

that their appeal was to Scripture as authoritative, but we must also take account of the fact that the authors were working on the far side of modern biblical criticism from ourselves. They made assumptions about the content, dating and authorship of the biblical books that we no longer can; and they did not balk at proof-texting in a way which has become impossible for us. For them, the Bible replaced the ecclesiastical apparatus of Rome, but in their hands it was a quarry to be plundered in order to devise doctrinal systems deemed orthodox, in which the glue was supplied by the Aristotelian logic in which they had been schooled. I do not say that they could have done anything else as children of their times, but I do not think that we can approach the Bible in exactly the way they did.

Robert Mackintosh, the self-styled “refugee” from the high Calvinism of the Free Church of Scotland, who found a home in the broader streams of Congregationalism, published a provocative tract in 1889 entitled, *The Obsolescence of the Westminster Confession of Faith*. In this he teased the Westminster authors for the way in which they had responded to Parliament’s request that they add biblical proof texts following the completion of their text. With characteristic irony he writes,

That an oath cannot oblige to sin is proved by the example (?) of David in his relations with Nabal and Abigail. The “contingency of second causes” is proved by a man “drawing a bow at a venture”, or by the occurrence of a fatal accident when an axehead “lights” on a bystander. Difficult questions on the doctrine of Providence are settled by the story of David and the men of Keilah. Finally—and I specially recommend this to the admirers of the Establishment principle—the proof that the civil magistrate may lawfully summon religious synods is found in the fact that Herod consulted the chief priests in order to plot more successfully how to murder the infant Jesus. Comment on these citations could be nothing but a feeble anti-climax. Let us treasure them up in our hearts.²¹

II

I turn next to the problems raised by the content of earlier confessional statements. It would be surprising, given the church’s obligation to confess the faith afresh in every age, if we could simply regurgitate the

21. R. Mackintosh, *The Obsolescence of the Westminster Confession*, 48.

contextually-influenced confessions of the past. On the one hand, some of them anathematize the Anabaptists and brand the Pope Antichrist, and we need no longer indulge in such obsolete polemics. Again, we may with some justification feel that church practice, family life, and moral duties, to which the *Second Helvetic Confession* devotes considerable attention, properly belong to the category of ecclesiastical advice and moral guidance, and that when placed in a confession such matters yield overload. This practice also seems to elevate polity and ethics as then understood to the same level as the major doctrinal testimonies. More seriously, it can be argued that in the *Westminster Confession* God's eternal decrees take precedence over his grace.²² In these ways and others we can see how questions arise for subsequent confessors by what their forebears wrote.

But questions arise equally because of what they omitted. While we can readily understand why they made so much of justification by grace through faith, their affirmations concerning creation, for example, are minimal. For my part, I should be hard put to understand a Reformed church that was drafting a confessional statement today which did not include a substantial paragraph on creation. Quite apart from the Bible's witness on the matter, with ecologists all around us we cannot be unaware of the seriousness of the challenges regarding our stewardship of the created order. Again, in face of the poor, the needy and the oppressed we today are bound to heed the call for justice; and when we ponder the life and death issues of abortion, euthanasia and genetic engineering, we should, surely wish to say more in doctrinal terms than our forebears did about the sanctity of human life and the *imago dei*, whilst refraining from delving into the intricacies of Christian social ethics. In a word, classical confessions can provoke unease both by what they say and by what they fail to say.

This point was fully appreciated by Forsyth: "The life is in the body, not in the system. It must be a dogma, revisible from time to time to keep pace with the Church's growth as a living body in a living world."²³ Hence, for example, the nineteenth-century debates in Scotland over God's universal love *vis à vis* election and predestination, which yielded the Declaratory Acts of the United Presbyterians in 1879 and the Free Church in 1892, which bodies united in 1900; these Acts in turn flowed into the Church of Scotland at the union of that Church with the United

22. See, for example, J. B. Torrance, "Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology," 46.

23. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 213.

Free Church in 1929. The Acts permitted liberty of opinion on matters that did not concern “the substance of the faith,” though, whether in a mood of political realism or godly amnesia, they did not stay to define that substance.²⁴ Clearly, conscientious difficulties with the content of confessional documents raises the question of their status and the use to which they are put. To this issue I now turn.

III

Confessional documents have been, and are, used in a variety of ways within the Reformed family. On the one hand, we find Fred H. Klooster of the Christian Reformed Church upholding “the binding character of confessions”, and endorsing the Formula of Subscription of his Church.²⁵ Over against this position is that of the Congregationalist strand of the Reformed family, to whom the formal act of confessional subscription is anathema. It is important to understand that this stance is not adopted on grounds of doctrinal laxity but, once again, as a faithful response in a particular socio-political context in England. My forebears, in peril of their lives, refused to subscribe to the words of men, especially when those words were legally enforced by governmental authorities bent on securing ecclesiastical comprehension as an aid to national cohesion in face of enemies. They upheld the church’s right and duty to submit to the Word of God alone; hence the martyrs of 1593 and surrounding dates.²⁶ They also had a profound sense of the continuing guidance of the Holy Spirit, and felt that to elevate, or fossilize, a specific form of words might in time constrain their response to the Spirit’s contemporary address to them through the Word—the very reason for the Scottish Declaratory Acts to which I referred. As I have already indicated, none of this prevented the Congregationalists from confessing the faith in a variety of ways, not least in declarations of faith. Indeed, they participated in the Westminster Assembly, and the doctrinal sections of their *Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order* (1658) largely follows *Westminster*. Such documents were regarded by the Congregationalists not as tests of faith but as acts of confessing, as constituting testimony, not as having the binding force of law.²⁷

24. See further Ross, “The Union of 1900”

25. See Klooster, “Theology, Confession and the Church.”

26. See further Sell, *Commemorations*, ch. 4.

27. See further Sell, *Dissenting Thought*, 57–58; Nuttall, *Congregationalists and Creeds*.

Where confessional documents are elevated into tests of faith or criteria of church membership, a number of undesirable consequences can follow. First, we may subtly substitute cerebralism for faith, *assensus* for *fiducia*. It should never be forgotten that “Christianity spread not as a religion of truth, but of power, help, healing, resurrection, redemption.”²⁸ We may feel that Forsyth here overstates his point, for the apostles had no doubt that Jesus Christ was the way, the truth and the life. But his point is that the apostles did not turn Christianity into a matter of a check-list of doctrines to be subscribed to. The emphasis of their activity was in the experimental direction. To them Jesus was Saviour before he was teacher; he had done something redemptive, not simply peddled teachings: “Christ did not come chiefly to teach truth, but to bring the reality and power of eternal life.”²⁹ After all, “We do not review God’s claims and then admit Him as we are satisfied.”³⁰ None of this is to deny that a Church may well wish to affirm more than the individual church member feels able to do, but the latter, sincerely believing in Jesus as Lord and Saviour, is not to be excommunicated because some doctrines—the pre-existence of Christ, for example—are beyond his or her grasp at present. As John Owen wisely wrote in the Preface to the *Savoy Declaration*,

The *Spirit of Christ* is in himself too *free*, great and generous a Spirit, to suffer himself to be used by any humane arm, to whip men into belief; he drives not, but *gently leads into all truth*, and *persuades* men to *dwell in the tents of like precious Faith*; which would lose its preciousness and value, if that sparkle of freeness shone not in it.³¹

Furthermore,

A Christian church is not a private society, whose regulations can be modified by its members at their pleasure, but a society founded by Christ Himself. . . . Nothing, therefore, should be required of any applicant for membership but personal faith in Christ. . . . Men come into the Christian church not because they have already mastered the contents of the Christian revelation, but to be taught them. . . . [E]rror and ignorance which do not

28. Forsyth, *Missions in State and Church*, 11.

29. Forsyth, “Unity and theology,” 74.

30. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority*, 146; cf. Forsyth, “Revelation and the Person of Christ,” 109.

31. Matthews, *The Savoy Declaration*, 53.

PART ONE: Confessing the Faith in Context

separate a man from Christ should not separate him from the church.³²

Secondly, the use of confessions as tests of faith may foster the myth of the saving *system*. At their best the drafters of the classical confessions knew that people are saved by grace, not by doctrinal systems. The authors of the *Scots Confession* fully understood that their work was liable to imperfection and was hence revisable:

[I]f any man will note in our Confession any chapter or sentence contrary to God's Holy Word, that it would please him of his gentleness and for Christian charity's sake to inform us of it in writing; and we, upon our honour, do promise him that by God's grace we shall give him satisfaction from the mouth of God, that is, from Holy Scripture, or else we shall alter whatever he can prove to be wrong.³³

There is no confessional "fundamentalism" here. Over against the idea of the saving system, "the sole content of Revelation, the power and gift in it, is the love, will, presence and purpose of God for our redemption."³⁴

Thirdly, the elevation of system plays into the hands of ecclesiastical agents of a controlling disposition, who may be inclined to, and may actually, brandish the system over the heads of those whom they suspect of being what our present-day politicians call "off message." Even the Congregationalists, who should have known better, fell into this trap from time to time, as when the Puritan John Goodwin was cut off because of his Arminianism. The Church is a fellowship of believers, called by grace, before it is a corporation bound by trust deeds. James Moffatt once noted that the idea of the Church as "the company of those who uphold and profess saving doctrine" first appears in the Socinian Racovian Catechism of 1604.³⁵ By contrast the Congregational scholar, F. J. Powicke, declared that

[I]f the constitutive principle of a church, what makes it a church, what forms it and holds it together, is the abiding presence in and among its members of a living Spirit, whose holy task is so to inspire the love of truth and so to cleanse the inner eye as that knowledge of Christ and the things of Christ shall

32. Dale, *A Manual of Congregational Principles*. 186, 187.

33. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions*, 165.

34. Forsyth, "Revelation and the person of Christ," 102.

35. So Nuttall, *Congregationalists and Creeds*, 10–11.

be growing perpetually clearer and fuller, then for a church to fancy it even possible that the sum of Christian truth has been compressed into the phrases of an ancient creed, or that its present apprehension and statement of the truth can be more than partial, is self-destructive and even sin against the Holy Ghost.³⁶

It cannot, however, be denied that the Reformed have sometimes found it hard to hold themselves to this high ideal. Descents into confessional legalism are not unknown in our history,³⁷ as if there were saving truths in the sense of truths which save. To hold this is to dethrone Christ. Hence the protests of the Arian Presbyterian divines of the eighteenth century, who charged their orthodox brethren with “Protestant popery” because of their elevation of confessional standards into tests of faith at the expense, as they thought, of the clear teaching of Scripture. To take but one of many examples, Samuel Bourn (1689–1754) declared that to impose a trinitarian test was “to give up *Scripture-sufficiency*, it is to return back into the Tenets of Popery. . . . If we pay that Regard to any Body of men, tho’ the most learned Assembly in the World, which is due to *Christ* only; we make a *Christ* of these Men; they are our Rabbi.”³⁸

Fourthly, sectarianism is the offspring of authoritarian, legalistic ecclesiasticism, and our Reformed family is replete with examples of it. If over the past eighty years it is possible that we have entered into more transconfessional unions than any other tradition, we can almost certainly outdo everyone else in the number of inner-family secessions we have spawned through the centuries. Quite frequently, though not always, these have resulted from the flexing of confessional muscles in unduly rigorist ways. Confessions have been used to justify withdrawal from the faithful rather than to confess the faith.

Underlying the four points just made is a fifth: the Reformed have sometimes managed to persuade themselves that confessional documents guard the faith (rather in the way that bishops—though presumably not

36. Powicke, “Historic Congregationalism in Britain,” 268. See further, Sell, *Saints: Visible, Orderly and Catholic*.

37. I do not imply that confessional documents alone have on occasion been abused in such a way as to threaten the gospel. Forsyth declared that the gospel’s “three great products—the Church, the Ministry, the Bible—have all threatened its life at some time and in some way.” See *The Church, The Gospel and Society*, 89.

38. Bourn, *The True Christian Way*, 23. At his ordination Bourn refused to assent to the *Westminster Confession*, for which reason some Presbyterian ministers boycotted the occasion. See further Sell, *Dissenting Thought*, ch. 7; Sell, *Enlightenment, Ecu-
menism, Evangel*, ch. 3.

heretical ones—are said to do in some other Christian communions). But the Reformed should think more that twice before subscribing to this view, for our own history bears witness to the fact that notwithstanding the *Westminster Confession*, the majority of old English Presbyterians who did not become Congregationalist during the eighteenth century, became Unitarian by the end of that century or early in the next.³⁹ This clearly demonstrates that confessions of faith can but witness to the faith if it is there. They do not create it, and it would be a usurpation of the role of God the Holy Spirit, *the* guardian of the faith, to suppose that were particular confessions to fall the gospel would fall with them. Hence the Puritan Thomas Goodwin's words, "If Christian judgments be well and thoroughly grounded in the doctrine of God's free grace and eternal love and redemption through Jesus Christ alone, and in the most spiritual inward operations of God's Spirit, that will fence them against all errors."⁴⁰

Standing staunchly in this line, my late college principal, Gordon Robinson, wrote,

[A] genuine trust in the operation of the Holy Spirit, held humbly, prayerfully and expectantly by ministers and people in their private devotion and in their gathering at worship and in the Church Meeting is not only our ultimate safeguard in matters of faith. Even to call it a safeguard is to speak on too mean a level. It is of the essence of our existence.⁴¹

Herein lies a caution against any confessional antiquarianism which would take our eye off our supreme task of discerning the mind of Christ by the Spirit in the here and now. However inconvenient it may sometimes be for professional ecclesiastics, God's gift of the Spirit, addressing his people through the Word may be found "quite as much with the intellectual babes whom the wise and prudent of John Robinson's day nicknamed Symon the Sadler, Tomkin the Taylor, Billy the Bellows-mender, as with the wise and prudent themselves."⁴² Nor should we forget the biblical rebuke addressed to those who mouthed all the right things—"the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord"⁴³—and failed to realize that their actual practice completely undermined their verbal confession.

39. For this complicated story see Sell, *Dissenting Thought*, ch. 5.

40. Quoted by Forsyth in *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, 119.

41. W. G. Robinson, "Congregationalism and the historic Faith," 213.

42. Powicke, "The Congregational Churches," 118.

43. Jeremiah 7:4.

IV

The upshot is that none of our confessional documents can be the guarantor of our identity as Reformed, still less as Christians. A free-wheeling, free-thinking liberalism is not, however, the only alternative to the undue elevation of such statements. Against all who thought it was, Forsyth thundered, “Too many are occupied in throwing over precious cargo; they are lightening the ship even of its fuel.”⁴⁴ But if hard-line confession-alism and free-wheeling liberalism will not suffice, what does constitute our identity and hold us in fellowship with Christians through the ages?

In my opinion, the only possible answer to that question, is, “The grace of God in the gospel.” By God’s grace we are granted forgiveness and new life, given our new identity as adopted sons or daughters in Christ, and engrafted into the fellowship of the Church as branches of the Vine. In other words, our final authority is not our little accounts of what the mighty God has done, but God’s saving act at the cross. While the Incarnation of Jesus Christ is temporally prior to Calvary, and while his person is logically prior to his work, for he cannot do what he does unless he is who he is, it is at the cross, not in the cradle, that the saving act is accomplished.⁴⁵ “It is from the experience of Christ’s salvation”, insisted Forsyth, “that the Church proceeds to the interpretation of the Saviour’s person.”⁴⁶ This was the historical order: this is what Jesus Christ has done; then who must he be? As Forsyth more fully explained:

Christ came not to *say* something, but to *do* something. His revelation was action more than instruction. . . . The thing He did was not simply to make us aware of God’s disposition in an impressive way. It was not to *declare* forgiveness. And it was

44. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority*, 261.

45. Forsyth never ceased to insist upon this point. It is at the very heart of his teaching. See, for further examples, *The Justification of God*, 89–90; *The Church, The Gospel and Society*, 120; *The Cruciality of the Cross*, 39, 50 n.; *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 216; *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 10; *God the Holy Father*, 40, 41. He deeply regretted that the Church’s early “ecumenical symbols not only do not start from the real source of authority in Christianity, but scarcely allude to it. I mean, of course, redeeming grace. . . . There is far too much said, even among ourselves, about the creeds and their simplicity and the way they keep to the Christian facts. Yes, and all but ignore the one fact on which Christianity rests—the fact of redemption by grace alone through faith.” See *The Church, The Gospel and Society*, 124. For further exposition of the idea that “the rationale of the incarnation is in the atonement,” see Denney, *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, 65; Sell *Aspects of Christian Integrity*, ch. 2.

46. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 332.

PART ONE: Confessing the Faith in Context

not even to *bestow* forgiveness. It was certainly not to *explain* forgiveness. It was to *effect* forgiveness, to set up the relation of forgiveness both in God and man.⁴⁷

To God's saving deed the Bible actually bears witness. The compilers of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.'s *Confession of 1967* rightly declared that "The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ."⁴⁸ Our confessional documents inadequately testify to the same thing; and the consciences of the Lord's individual saints, his adopted sons and daughters, concur as they are enabled by the Holy Spirit. "In a word," wrote Forsyth, "that is over the Bible which is over the Church and the Creeds. It is the Gospel of Grace, which produced Bible, Creed and Church alike."⁴⁹ Zwingli said it much earlier: "The sum of the Gospel is that our Lord Jesus Christ, the true Son of God, has made known to us the will of His heavenly Father, and by his innocence has redeemed us from death and reconciled us to God."⁵⁰

In view of this, it seems to me that the ideal Reformed confession of faith would set out from an assertion of the good news that by the victory of the cross God the Father's holiness is satisfied, Christ the Son's Saviourhood confirmed, and God the Holy Spirit's work of engrafting believers into the Church as branches of the Vine is under way, and will continue until he come. Such an assertion sets out from God's saving act; it is deliberately couched in trinitarian terms; it includes an ecclesiological element over against any individualism whether "evangelical" or "liberal"; and the reference to the Spirit's continuing work covers the eschatological dimension. Such a confession stimulates the brain; but above all it stands as the joyous testimony of the heart on the part of those who have been saved by grace through faith. The first paragraph of the 1967 *Confession* of the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. comes as close as any such document to what I have in mind:

47. Forsyth, *God the Holy Father*, 19.

48. *Reformed Witness Today*, 210.

49. Forsyth, *The Church, The Gospel and Society*, 67. Cf. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority*, 53. Interestingly, the Baptist Union Declaration of Principle of 1904 reads, "The basis of this Union is that our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice as revealed in the Holy Scriptures . . ." Quoted by Hayden, "The Particular Baptist Confession," 407.

50. *Zwingli's Sixty-Seven Articles of 1523*. In Cochrane, editor, *Reformed Confessions*, 36.

In Jesus Christ God was reconciling the world to himself. Jesus Christ is God with man. He is the eternal Son of the Father, who became man and lived among us to fulfill the work of reconciliation. He is present in the church by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue and complete his mission. This work of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the foundation of all confessional statements about God, man, and the world. Therefore the church calls men to be reconciled to God and to one another.

No doubt any Reformed church would wish to say more than this. My concern is that they do not say less. Such a primary confession can be filled out in many ways for purposes of exposition, teaching and the like. It can have polity clauses appended and ethical guidance attached. But no confessional document, however long, will be adequate if it is not rooted in the primary testimony to God's good news.

V

The implications of such a starting-point are manifold. The first is that the truth is underscored that the Church is God's creation by the Holy Spirit on the ground of the Son's finished work. It is not a human invention. Secondly, the ecumenical point follows that any doctrine or practice which would exclude those called by grace from fellowship at the Lord's table is inherently sectarian, and a denial of the Spirit's work.⁵¹ For "The unity of the Church rests on the evangelical succession and not on the canonical . . . which ties up the Church more than it unites it."⁵² Thirdly, this primary act of confessing has implications for our worship. It stands as a corrective to any anthropocentric coddling of the saints; it does not permit a subjective, sentimental, wallowing in God's love, because it understands that "Faith . . . is more concerned with the nature of the object than with the mood of the subject,"⁵³ that God's love is holy love, and that "love is not holy without judgment."⁵⁴ Centring as it does in the cross, it forbids the kind of incarnationism which becomes indistinguishable from benign, ahistorical, immanentist process.⁵⁵ Above all, it encourages

51. See further Sell, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel*, ch. 11.

52. Forsyth, "Unity and theology," 77. Cf. Forsyth, *Congregationalism and Reunion*, 21–22.

53. *Ibid.*, 60.

54. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, 84.

55. See further Sell, *Philosophical Idealism and Christian Belief*, ch. 5; Sell, *Confessing and Commending the Faith*, ch. 5.

PART ONE: Confessing the Faith in Context

heartfelt rejoicing in God's *act* of redeeming grace, apart from which we should have no forgiveness, no new life in Christ, no identity in him, no communion of saints. Such a confession will revive our preaching, for we shall not merit the stricture which Forsyth levelled against some of the preaching of his day: "It wrestles with many problems between man and man, class and class, nation and nation; but it does not face the moral problem between the guilty soul and God."⁵⁶ Neither shall we fall for precisely the kind of crowd-pulling antics which Jesus steadfastly repudiated during his temptations in the wilderness: "[W]e must not empty the Gospel in order quickly to fill the Church."⁵⁷ Rather, our outreach will be informed by the manner of him who is the good news, and our ethics will be motivated by gratitude for all that God has done for us and for the world.

But some would raise the question, "Can we any longer confess in the terms presented above?" I have heard some theologians say that we could not nowadays write an account of the things commonly agreed among us because we do not share enough of a common language. There are those who do not wish to use Fatherhood language of God; there are those who wish to substitute functional terms for trinitarian persons;⁵⁸ and within the Reformed family worldwide there is a wide diversity of belief. In such a situation the only recourse, I believe, is to return to the cross, which puts all our ideologies and sectarianisms in perspective, and gives us a gospel that it should be our greatest joy to proclaim. Has God saved? Has God brought us into his one Church? If we own a common Saviour we shall think more than twice before unchurching one another over differences of linguistic expression. "I am sure", wrote Forsyth, "that, if we had a theology brought entirely up to date in regard to current thought, we should not then have the great condition for the kingdom of God. It is the wills of men, and not their views, that are the great obstacle to the Gospel, and the things most intractable."⁵⁹ Hence the cross. Thence the gospel.

56. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 24. Cf. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 5, 89: "We must all preach to our age, but woe to us if it is our age we preach, and only hold up the mirror to the time. . . . We must, of course, go some way to meet the world, but when we do meet we must do more than greet."

57. Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State*, 25.

58. See further Sell, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel*, 365–75.

59. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 197.

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PART ONE: Confessing the Faith in Context

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