



# SOUTHWESTERN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

FOUNDATIONS OF OUR FAITH

GENERAL DISCUSSION

*BENAJAH HARVEY CARROLL*

## *General Discussion*

I am going to give you a little talk this afternoon on the articles of faith—what a church believes. First, a creed is what we believe, and a confession of faith is a declaration of what we believe. That declaration may be verbal or it may be in writing. There is very great necessity for both creed and confession.

Every man in the world has some religious belief; even if it is of a negative kind, he has a belief. It is as lawful to state it as it is to have it. When stated, whether in words or in writing, it is a confession. The New Testament is the authority both for having a creed and the expression of it. In one of my recent lectures, the one on the great unities in Ephesians, delivered before this class, I cited a number of passages showing how the creed of the New Testament churches was formulated into a confession.

The next important question is the use of the creed. What is it good for? Why should a church have a creed? And why should it set it forth formally in a confession? There are quite a number of so-called churches, all claiming to be churches of Jesus Christ: Baptists, Methodists, Campbellites, Episcopalians, Christian Science, and many others.

An outsider, receiving religious impressions, wishes to connect himself with one of these churches, and if he wants to do so intelligently the first thing that occurs to him is, “What does this church believe? What does the Methodist church believe? What does the Baptist church believe?” He wants some method of satisfying himself of just what he is joining, what the church stands for, what its creed is. So we see at once the necessity of some formal statement of what these various organizations hold to be the truth, coming up on the very entrance into the church.

When I was converted, that was a question I had to settle. I was converted in a Methodist meeting and was very much attached to them. They thought I ought to join them, but I thought I ought to know what they stood for and what others stood for—that I ought to make an examination. I might agree with them in many things, and particularly in their method of saving souls, but there might be many other things in their belief to which I could not subscribe.

I asked for a copy of the standards for their church. One of them made me a present of a *Discipline*; another gave me Watson’s *Institutes* and Gaston’s *Collections*; another made me a present of a hymnbook. I have

them yet. I studied them to see if I could be a Methodist, and the more I studied them the more I knew that I could not join them.

Then a Presbyterian gave me their confessions of faith and Calvin's *Institutes*. I have them yet. I found in them more to approve than in the Methodist standards, with some things which I could not accept. I then read Alexander Campbell's *Christian System* and much of his *Millennial Harbinger*, comparing all with the New Testament.

Very carefully also I went over the Baptist faith and polity. My father was a Baptist preacher, but I distrusted the influences of early impressions and desired to reach an intelligent, individual conviction on so grave a matter as joining the church. This investigation accounts for the length of time between my conversion and my baptism.

In the case of very young people there is seldom a comparison of the claims of different denominations. But I was a grown man of considerable life experience in joy and sorrow, and had a wide range of general information. My relation to my new found Savior was held above all others. I wanted to be loyal to Him. I had no criticism to offer on the course of others, but for myself, I must know just what I was doing in uniting with the church. A church without a creed could not have gained my respect, even. They ought to stand for something definite or go out of business. I am not making my exceptional case a standard, but it is one of a class, and this class finds a church creed useful in determining what church to join.

The second use is this: The church is made the judge of the preacher's soundness of faith, and is required to reject him if he is a heretic. What constitutes heresy? There must be some standard to determine what is orthodoxy in the view of the church or else the members cannot be the judge as to whether a preacher is going astray. If you say we have no creed at all, how can you correct him? If a preacher teaches that Jesus is not God, or that he believes sprinkling is baptism, how are you to call him to account? He would say, "When I joined you, you had no creed and I took it for granted that you had no particular views on this subject. How can you call me to account?"

Christ set in the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, pastor-teachers, for the purpose of leading men unto full development of the Bible truth, and to bring them to maturity in Christian knowledge, and to save them from being a victim of every foolish doctrine of every evangelical tramp that came along (Eph 4:11-16). Suppose you have no declaration of what you believe to be the truth, how are you going to examine a man in ordaining him to the ministry? If you say the Bible is your creed, all others say the same thing. That is not the point. What does your church understand the Bible to teach? So in ordination to the ministry it is essential that in some way there be a settled, uniform view of the teachings

of the Bible, otherwise you can have no examination of a candidate in any proper sense.

Alexander Campbell started out with an opposition to creeds and confessions of faith. In his debate with N.L. Rice this was one of the propositions debated, as worded by Campbell himself: "Creeds and Confessions of faith, as bonds, of union and communion, are necessarily schismatical and heretical." Mr. Rice smote him hip and thigh somewhat after this fashion. "Mr. Campbell, do your people believe anything in particular about the Bible? We notice you dig us a good deal, and all other denominations. Have you any views at all, for instance, on baptism, the ministry, or what a church is? Is there anything at all that you insist upon?" Campbell said, "We take the New Testament." Mr. Rice showed the changes to this concession of Mr. Campbell from his published lamentation of existing disorder among his followers: "We have all sorts of men preaching all sorts of doctrines." That is what a fisherman would call a cork-sinker. He pressed the matter home by asking Mr. Campbell why he wrote his *Christian System*.<sup>1</sup>

Mark the bearing of this matter on the election of pastors. Your church wants to elect a pastor, and one says, "I recommend Brother A, as he seems to be able to get along handsomely with the young people." "What does Brother A preach?" "Oh, he does not preach much of anything, but he plays golf splendidly and is welcomed socially wherever he goes." "But does the Bible have some requirements about what a preacher must teach? For instance, what does A teach about Christ, the Holy Spirit, the church?" "I don't know." "Well, we must know before we call Mr. A."

I am giving you these introductory remarks to show you not only the necessity for a creed, but the uses of a creed. What I said in the Ephesians lecture on the unities is certainly true: "The longest creed ever written is more valuable and less hurtful than the shortest." Suppose you reduce your creed to this: "I believe in God," and compare that with a creed that had thirty-nine articles. Which is the more efficient? There is something lacking in the vast vacancy of the first. Tom Payne said, "I believe in God." He died believing in God, but he did not believe in Jesus Christ, nor in the Bible. Every Jew believes in God, but not in Jesus Christ, nor in Christianity.

I am seeking to get before you this afternoon what, in various lessons, I have presented to you—the deposit of the faith (2 Tim 1:13–14), "the faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3). Paul received

<sup>1</sup>Editor's Note: Nathan L. Rice was a Presbyterian minister who debated Campbell on baptism, the Holy Spirit in conversion, and the use of creeds. Edward H. Sawyer, "Campbell-Rice Debate," in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Douglas Allen Foster (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 145–47.

something definite from Jesus Christ, and he delivered something definite to the church, and he charged the church to keep that something definite just as he gave it, and to pass it on down as it was received (2 Tim 2:2; 1 Cor 11:23, 15:3). A man is either a fool in knowledge or a knave who denies that he has a creed.

It is not the object of the creed to put it above the Bible, nor in the place of it. A sufficiently good creed can be made by putting fundamental points together; you can put in enough to define. When referring to the Trinity, define what is meant by the Trinity: "Baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19b). That is the Scripture. Another one: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor 13:14). You may draw up a creed in that way to cover all the vital and fundamental points of the gospel.

When you try a man before the church for heresy, you try him by the teachings of the Bible, not by the creed. But you use the creed this way: He has substituted his interpretation of the Bible for the interpretations of the church. While he has a right as an individual to his own interpretation, he has not the right to claim a place among you holding a different view. For instance, if a man wants to preach that there ought to be no church, no ordinances, like a Quaker, he is at liberty to do so, but should not do so occupying a Baptist pulpit and claiming to be a Baptist preacher. Common honesty demands that he shall not take the pulpit of a denomination to undermine the faith of that denomination.

Another point in the use of creeds is where property is involved. Here are a number of people associated together in the belief of what Christ has taught, and covenanting to do what he has commanded. Their creed sets forth what they believe to be the truth. They buy a church and a parsonage. A majority of the church may depart from the expressed creed of the church when it was organized. The minority can appeal to law and hold possession of the property on the ground that the organization sets forth the objects of its existence, and that the majority has departed from the compact and wants to divert the property to other purposes. They cannot do it under law.

Suppose, for an extreme assumption, that three-fourths of the members of the First Baptist Church of Waco should become persuaded that the Methodists are right. Can they take that church property over to the Methodists? They cannot. The question of creed will determine.

In preparing a creed, the first thing usually set forth is what we regard as the standard. Everything must have a standard. If you go to a grocer and buy five pounds of anything he has to sell, there must be a standard to tell what a pound is, otherwise he might give you only a third of what

you think you ought to have. You can hold him to what the standard of a pound is—16 ounces.

Nearly all creeds commence with the declaration that their standard is the Bible. The first article is generally what you hold as the standard of faith. Protestants will all say the Bible. Catholics say the Bible and traditions. That was correct before the New Testament was written, for what Paul said orally was standard just as much as when it was written. It was tradition until God's revelation was completed and reduced to writing. Then you could not bring in tradition. You cannot put up today what somebody says that Peter said a great many years ago. You go to what Peter has written, or what some other inspired man has written about Peter. So that every Protestant church, and particularly the Baptists, will say that the Bible is the standard—the Word of God.

That brings out the question, "What is the Bible? How much is there of it?" Here we differ from the Romanists again. They will agree with you on what is the New Testament, but not on what is the Old Testament. Over and over again I have taught this class the variations of our Old Testament from the Romanist Old Testament, and told you just where they come in.

Now, let me repeat some things I have said and show some items of a Bible creed. What then is a creed? Your creed is what you believe. What is a confession of faith? It is the declaration of what you believe, and every man has a creed and they confess it is just to set it forth. Suppose a stranger should move into a community. The locality suits him and he is pleased with the location of the church and the manner of the preacher and he wants to join the church. He says, "What do you believe?" You say, "Well, we believe the Bible." "Well, whose understanding of the Bible? Are there not some things that are settled with you?" If not, he will know whether to join or not.

Note very clearly the Bible sets forth the matter of creed and over and over again the creed is given. Paul says, "I delivered unto you that which I also received; how Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3). Now that is a very fine showing for a creed. A man that does not believe in the vicarious expiation of Jesus Christ, what does he want to join the church for? Then he adds: "And that he was buried and rose again the third day," and that being risen he was seen, recognized (1 Cor 15:4–8). Paul puts those four points in the creed.

Well, take another statement by Paul (1 Tim 3:15–16). He says, "The church is the pillar and ground of the truth." Then he goes on and mentions six items: "God was manifested in the flesh; so manifested that He was recognized by the angels." Notwithstanding His humanity the angels could see through that and saw that He was God whom they worshipped

in heaven before His incarnation. “He was vindicated by the Spirit,” at His baptism; on the cross; in the coming of the Spirit, in response to the direction, to abide on earth until He comes again. Then He was not only manifest in the flesh, recognized by the angels, vindicated by the Spirit, but He was “preached to the nations.” And I would not want a man to come into the church I belong to if he believed that Christ was to be preached only to the Jews. He is to be preached among all nations. That is the crowning element of the creed. Then he says that He was “believed on” when so preached. Preach Him to the Jews and somebody will believe on Him; preach Him to the Gentiles and somebody will believe on Him; preach Him to whom you will and there will always be somebody to believe on Him. The next item of the creed: “He was received up into glory.” Who wants to leave that out? There, He is King, the Lord of the Universe, the Priest to make intercession for us forever, and commands us to watch, for He shall come again to the world.

Then take the eighth chapter of Romans and see Paul’s words on two lines of salvation where he says, “whom He foreknew them He also predestined; whom He predestined He also called; whom He called He also justified; whom He justified He also glorified.” Who dares to leave that out of the creed—the calling, justification, and glorification of His people? Then in the latter part of the chapter he takes what is called the four pillars of salvation: “First, it is Christ that died, and has risen again, and has been exalted to the right hand of God on high, and Who also maketh intercession for us.”

Then take the commission (Matt 28:18–20). There is a creed. First, they are to go, tell the nations, to every creature—that shows the scope of their work. And then they are to make disciples, as He made them, by repentance of faith. Then they are to baptize them, and then they are to teach them to observe everything else that He commanded. Now, what a mighty creed that is!

Suppose a man should say, “I do not believe in the Trinity.” I say, look at your Bible creed: “Baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19b). Look at your Bible benediction: “And now may the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all forever” (2 Cor 13:14). Most people, who do not want to believe anything, say, “If you have a creed let it be little; do not say much.” Now, the bigger your creed, the better; and the less creed you have, the less account you are.