

THE VALUE OF HISTORIC CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS

ALEX CHEN

In 2015, Covenant Fellowship Church launched Risen Hope Church in the suburbs of Philadelphia. But five months later, the energy and joy of this new mission work had come to a screeching halt when we experienced the tragic and surprising death of one of our key leaders. He was a pillar in the church—a small group leader, ministry team leader, and Sunday school teacher. Our church was in shock. We gathered on Sunday wanting to worship, but the sense of loss hung heavily in the air. So what does a pastor say in a moment like that?

I read the introduction to the *Heidelberg Catechism*, which begins with this question: “What is your only comfort in life and in death?”

The answer couldn’t have been more relevant for us: “That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact all things must work together for my salvation...”

In that moment of heart-breaking loss, we needed to be reminded that the Good Shepherd didn’t leave or forsake us: *That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.* We needed the ministry of theology; we needed the great unchanging truths of

Scripture, as summarized and stated by a historic confession of the faith.

In every generation, the creeds and confessions of the church of Christ have always strengthened, comforted, and protected God’s people. Our new *Statement of Faith (SoF)* has these same goals in view. In affirming this new statement, we are in no way devaluing creeds and confessions of the past. Rather, we are honoring the saints of centuries past by reaffirming and restating the truths they held dear (sometimes even borrowing their language), and we are continuing the same work carried out by the framers of those historic confessions: summarizing the truth of God for our generation, for our children, and our children’s children.

Building on the Past

We are intentionally standing on the shoulders of others.

Our new Sovereign Grace *Statement of Faith* encapsulates the truths we hold dear in life and death. Our statement of faith is:

- Orthodox (rooted in historic, biblical Christianity),
- Reformed (birthed out of the Protestant Reformation and the five solas),
- Evangelical (summons us to be born again), and
- Confessional (commits our denomination to a significant body of doctrine).

This means we didn’t reinvent the wheel! Our *SoF* draws from and is built upon what the church has learned throughout its two millennia. We dare not get creative with the truth or seek to invent new doctrine. We are intentionally standing on the shoulders of others.

Following in the footsteps of the *Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF 1.10)*, we state upfront our submission to Scripture: “Scripture alone is our supreme and final authority and the rule of faith and life. The Scriptures must not be added to or taken away from, and all creeds, confessions, teachings, and prophecies are to be tested by the final authority of God’s Word” (*SoF*

section 1, "The Scriptures").

Nevertheless, even Scripture is self-aware that teaching must be summarized so that it can be taught and passed down to future generations. "Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 1:13; cf. 1 Tim. 6:3-4). Certain patterns of sound words correctly represent and transmit the faith and love in Christ Jesus, and by implication, others don't. It is those faithful patterns of sound words that would eventually develop into our creeds and confessions.

Ancient Formulations

The Apostles' Creed is one of the earliest patterns of sound words accepted by the church. It articulates the central beliefs of the Christian faith:

*I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.
And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
he descended into the grave;
the third day he rose again from the dead;
He ascended in heaven, and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Ghost,
the holy catholic church;
the communion of saints;
the forgiveness of sins;
the resurrection of the body;
and the life everlasting. Amen.*

Each phrase serves as an important theological header. Early in the history of our church, Risen Hope did a sermon series on the Apostles' Creed. This would assure those newer to the church that while we were a new church, we were not inventing anything new and that our church was built on a body of Christian doctrine. In doing this, we were following in the footsteps of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, first published in 1563 in Heidelberg, Germany, to

unite and catechize the people of that province.¹ Questions 23-58 (over 25% of the entire catechism) are devoted to unfolding the truths of the Apostles' Creed. Heidelberg is written in a first-person format, which makes it intensely personal, warm, and pastoral.² As we read and meditate on Heidelberg in our church and home, it's as if the arms of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ himself, come around our shoulders and embrace us.

Take, for instance, Q52: "How does Christ's return 'to judge the living and the dead' comfort you?" Answer: "In all my distress and persecution I turn my eyes to the heavens and confidently await as judge the very One who has already stood trial in my place before God and so has removed the whole curse from me. All His enemies and mine He will condemn to everlasting punishment: but me and all His chosen ones He will take along with Him into the joy and the glory of heaven."

Clarifying Biblical Doctrines

Before there was Heidelberg, the Nicene Creed and others built upon the Apostles' Creed to define boundaries of orthodoxy for the doctrine of God and Christ. It does matter whether God is Triune and Jesus is truly God. These aren't ivory-tower concerns. As Jesus prayed in John 17, eternal life hinges upon knowing and rightly worshiping God: "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). Denial of essential Christian doctrine is a denial of the Christian faith.

For example, consider the nature of the Son of God. The Apostles' Creed simply states, "[I believe] in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord," as there was no need at that time to do more than affirm Jesus as the Son of God.

However, when Arius taught that Jesus was a created being, the first and greatest of God's creatures, but not fully God, the church needed to clarify what is meant by "Son of God." Does that mean fully God or something less than God? If Jesus isn't fully God, how can He save us, restore us to God, and serve as our sinless substitute and mediator? If Jesus isn't God, we dare not worship Him. So the Nicene Creed explicitly spelled out the full deity of the Son. It includes this statement: "[We believe in] one Lord Jesus Christ,

1. CARL TRUEMAN, *THE CREEDAL IMPERATIVE* (WHEATON, IL: CROSSWAY, 2012), 121.

2. *IBID.*

the Son of God, the only-begotten of His Father, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father." A later version in 381 AD would also affirm the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

If you're a pastor, does your worship singing, prayers, ordinances, and preaching glorify the Father, Son, and Spirit? This doesn't mean every Sunday service requires a systematic theology treatise on the Trinity. But our doctrine of God must drive our worship of the Triune God: "the Father originates, the Son accomplishes, and the Spirit completes" (*SoF* section 2, "The Triune God"). Creeds and confessions serve as another set of eyes to make sure our ministry appropriately, faithfully, and proportionately captures the teaching of Scripture.

To clarify important biblical doctrines where the Roman Catholic church had erred, Reformed confessions would add further details on the Lord's Supper (clarifying that the bread and the cup do not become the body and blood of Christ), the gospel, and justification (we are saved by grace alone through faith alone), and Scripture (God's Word has the sole and ultimate authority).

*Our doctrine of
God must drive our
worship of the Triune
God.*

To clarify the doctrines of grace where Arminians had erred, the confessions would also speak directly about God's sovereignty in election. This would safeguard justification by grace. We can't even claim any credit for our faith, which itself is a gift of God. Borrowing language from *WCF*, our *SoF* reads, "God in His great love, before the foundation of the world, chose those whom he would save in Christ Jesus. God's election is entirely gracious and not at all conditioned upon foreseen faith, obedience, perseverance, or any merit in those whom God has chosen. His decision to set his saving love on the elect is based entirely on His sovereign will and good pleasure." (*SoF* section 3, "God's Sovereign Purposes").

Contending for our Faith Today

Our *SoF* not only builds upon the past, but it also provides us with the in-

tellectual and spiritual tools to contend, in our day, for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). Every generation must contend for the truth of Scripture in its particular time and place. Even as we benefit from past victories, we face fresh challenges.

Take, for example, the current controversies over biblical teaching on gender, sexuality, and marriage. How does the Bible define these, why does it matter, and how do we articulate our rationale? Though first published in 1646, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* is still relevant today:

- “After God had made all other creatures, He created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls...” (WCF 4.2)
- “Marriage is to be between one man and one woman...” (WCF 24.1)

However, the WCF didn't have to address more specifically the culture's open rebellion against its Creator in the ideas that gender is something one can choose (and isn't chosen for us by the Creator) and that sexual relations can be any arrangement (or number) of partners who give their mutual consent. As churches continue to capitulate, our *SoF* reiterates and clarifies what the church has affirmed for two millennia:

- “Gender, designated by God through our biological sex, is, therefore, neither incidental to our identity nor fluid in its definition, but is essential to our identity as male and female” (*SoF* section 4, "Creation, Providence, and Man").
- “God instituted marriage as the union of one man and one woman who complement each other in a one-flesh union that ultimately serves as a type of the union between Christ and His church. This remains the only normative pattern of sexual relations for humanity” (*SoF* section 4, "Creation, Providence, and Man").

It's also noteworthy to point out explicit statements on the sanctity of human life, now under greater assault through abortion and euthanasia: “... all people remain God's image-bearers, capable of fellowship with Him and possessing intrinsic dignity and value at every stage of life from conception to death” (*SoF* section 4, "Creation, Providence, and Man").

But our *SoF* doesn't just contend for primary doctrinal issues, such as the Trinity, incarnation, justification, and man's creation in God's image. This

document codifies the theological and biblical convictions that define Sovereign Grace Churches. Our *SoF* unifies us around what the Bible teaches, even if we might disagree with other gospel-preaching churches.

For instance, while we would agree with much of *WCF* chapter 28 on baptism, we disagree with the doctrine of infant baptism and affirm that baptism is only for believers: “Baptism is an initiatory, unrepeated sacrament for those who come to faith in Christ” (*SoF* section 12, “The Church of Christ”).

Finally, it’s worth noting that while the *WCF* seems to make room for prophetic giftings (“private spirits” are mentioned in *WCF* 1.10, and a number of the *WCF* authors held that certain kinds of prophecy continued), our *SoF* goes much further by denying historic cessationism and encouraging us to pursue and practice all the gifts of the Spirit: “...the full range of spiritual gifts remain at work in the church and are given for the good of the church and its witness to the world. We are therefore to earnestly desire and practice them until Christ returns.” (*SoF* section 10, “The Empowering Ministry of the Spirit”).

A Rich Reformation Heritage

In this brief article, I’ve scratched the surface of the rich Reformation heritage that we enjoy and hopefully whetted your appetite for more. Consider reading *The Need for Creeds Today* by J.V. Fesko or *The Creedal Imperative* by Carl Trueman for further study.

For those who are pastors or involved in Sunday planning: Let the historic Reformed confessions serve you as you plan your worship services. Let them help you think through gospel applications. (The *Westminster Catechism* has wonderful sections devoted to each of the Ten Commandments, expounding them in light of New Covenant grace.) Let them strengthen and comfort your church. (Entire sermons could be preached through the introduction of Heidelberg alone.)

For all Christians: Consider reading the historic confessions devotionally. There is a wealth of truth to be treasured in them. Much like singing songs from centuries past, you will find these doctrinal statements from centuries past uniquely edifying to your soul. And, be sure to read past creeds and confessions in light of our own *SoF* in order to deepen our denominational convictions and celebrate our shared values.

It is a joyful thing to have our own confessional document. God has been very kind to us. Let's make sure this moment deepens and does not lessen our valuing of the rich statements of our faith made by generations past.

ALEX CHEN

Alex Chen is an elder at [Risen Hope Church](#) (Prospect Park, PA).