

Christian Unity – True and False

The churches in the Western World and particularly in Britain appear to be in terminal decline. Where attendances could be numbered not so long ago in many hundreds today there are only tens. The church used to be respected by politicians but now it is ignored and despised. Many fear to speak in a derogatory way of Mohammed but think little of blaspheming Christ. Christianity is broken into numerous churches in conflict and rivalry with one another. The various churches are also divided internally over various issues and the media love to portray these divisions. What are we to do? Many think the answer is in the Ecumenical Movement which papers over the cracks and proclaims unity at the expense of truth. Others see the answer in separatism – come out from all and keep yourself pure by associating with no other church but your own. I would like to assert in this booklet that both extremes are wrong. There is a false Christian unity which must be opposed but there is also a true Christian unity which we must strive after with all our heart. Basically my subject is Ecumenicity. That is the common modern word used for Christian unity. There is a good and bad ecumenicity.

Ecumenicity

The word “ecumenicity” comes from a Greek word meaning the inhabited world. We read in the New Testament of the decree of Caesar Augustus that “all the world” should be taxed (Lk.2:1). The word used there is *oikoumenos*. From this word came the so called Ecumenical Councils of fourth and fifth centuries. To these, bishops from all over the known world were invited e.g. the Councils of Nicea 325, Constantinople 381, Ephesus 431, and Chalcedon 451. Roman Catholics regard the Council of Trent which met between 1545-63, Vatican I, 1869-70 and Vatican II, 1962-65 as ecumenical councils in this sense, but it is worth noting that only Roman Catholic Bishops were invited to these.

The twentieth century has seen a new phenomenon emerge – the Ecumenical Movement leading to formation of the World Council Churches. Here the idea is added that representatives of all the various churches are to be present. Indeed the word has come to mean “uniting churches” so that you can have an ecumenical council of churches say for Great Britain or even an ecumenical service e.g. in Salisbury, i.e. one in which many, preferably all, churches take part.

We hope to deal with our subject under the following headings:

1. Confessional Christianity
2. The Ecumenical Movement
3. True Christian Unity

1. Confessional Christianity

Immediately the question arises as to what do we mean by “Confessional Christianity”? “Confessional” is a term used by Roman Catholics for their so called “sacrament” of confessing sins to a priest and seeking absolution from him. The Scriptures teach that we are to confess our sins to God so as to find forgiveness from the only one who has power to forgive sin: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (Jn.1:9). But this is not what we are referring to in our title to this section. Much more closely related to our subject are the words of Paul: “For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation” (Rom.10:10). We are commanded to confess Christ before men i.e. to tell who He is and what He has done for us. All Christians do this to some extent. But “Confessional Christianity” goes a step further. It draws up a written statement of what is believed and, so, what is to be confessed. That is a personal confession of the individual’s faith. But others also may join in adhering to that confession. A “confessional church” is one characterised by a confession of faith to which at least its teachers and leaders subscribe. For example the Free Church of Scotland is a confessional church and its

confessional document is the Westminster Confession of Faith. Before considering the reasons for having a confession of faith I would like us first to turn to the Scriptures to consider redemptive history and to see what were the practices in biblical times.

Biblical Origins of Confessions

Oral Tradition

Oral tradition was very important in ancient times. Stories were passed on from generation to generation. For example accounts of creation and the flood must have been passed on from parents to children. An early form of the Gospel telling of the promised seed of the woman who would bruise the serpent's head must also have been communicated. The clothes of skin with which God covered the nakedness of Adam and Eve must have been an early form of sacrifice. What else could cover the shame that they felt in God's eyes? Some time later we find Abel offering a more excellent sacrifice than Cain because by faith he recognised the need to approach God only with blood and so his action was pointing to the death of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross as his only hope. The world existed for thousands of years before the first part of Scriptures were written. Moses wrote first five books around 1300BC. Thus if we follow Archbishop Ussher's chronology, Moses' writings did not appear till 2,700 years after creation. There may of course have been other early texts which were replaced by the Scriptures written by Moses. But whether there were such or not, most of the law and the Gospel must have been transmitted orally from one generation to the next, augmented of course from time to time by dreams, visions, theocratic appearances and proclamations of prophets or seers. Even after the five books of Moses were written such books would not of course be commonly available to the people. They were hand written and so would be rare. The priests and the prophets taught the people.

Ceremonies and Monuments

The ceremonies, feasts and festivals of the ceremonial law had a very important teaching function. For example the Passover was so designed that a child would ask "What does this mean?" Then the father would explain how they had been in Egypt and the Lord had delivered them from bondage to the Egyptians by a mighty outstretched arm. The blood of the lamb on the door-post would be explained as the protection afforded by the sacrifice when the destroying angel went through the land. The absence of leaven was due to the haste with which they left the land of Egypt etc. Similarly when Israel crossed the Jordan a pillar was erected at the crossing, composed of stones taken from the bed of the river where the Israelites had amazingly crossed on dry land. This would be a permanent reminder of the miraculous crossing of the Jordan. Another case was the altar raised by the Reubenites and Gadites not for sacrifices but for a memorial. All these were reminders of God's redemption.

Central statements of the Law

There were certain central statements of the Law which Israel was particularly directed to remember and of which they had a duty to remind others. Not all the words in the five books of Moses were in the same category though all were inspired and inerrant.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 is known as the Shema and contains what has been called the "fundamental truth of Israel's religion" and the "fundamental duty founded upon it" – the nature of God oneness, and the response of love which He demands. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord, And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might" (vv4-5). These words came to be traditionally recited in morning and evening prayers and before going to bed at night.

Following the words quoted, we read: "And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as

frontlets between thine eyes. Thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates”.

The Pharisees wrongly took this literally and made for themselves phylacteries, hollow boxes made of the skin of clean animals containing tiny scrolls on which four passages of Scripture were written by hand: Exodus 13:1-1, 13:11-16, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21. Also they made mezuzahs which they attached to their door posts. These were little boxes containing Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21. Jesus condemns this literalistic practice of the Pharisees: “But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments” (Matt.23:5).

However, from this we see that certain verses of Scripture were given a particular prominence. They formed a kind of early creed or confession.

Songs

Moses taught the people a song which would help them to remember their God, who He is, what He had done and what He would yet do for them. Also it would remind them of who they were, their sins and how they should relate to this great God (Deut.32). This was another kind of confession.

New Testament Church

Following the giving of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, initially there was one church in Jerusalem. It grew rapidly. Soon 5000 men were members. Obviously this large number could not meet in one place. Yet it was one church, the church in Jerusalem. The disciples were then scattered abroad through persecution and they went everywhere preaching the word. The missionary efforts of Paul and others, greatly extended the church by the blessing of the Holy Spirit. As was to be expected, problems eventually arose from different people’s interpretations of the Gospel. One particular difficulty was in relating Gentiles to Jews and the place that the ceremonial law was to have in the New Testament church. A meeting of church leaders was called which is known as the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). Its findings were sent round the churches. This would be an early creed or confession with regard to a point of doctrine.

Creeds

Very early on in the New Testament church creeds emerge. The word comes from the Latin *credo*, I believe. These appear to have been used for example at baptism. In Acts 8:37 the Ethiopian Eunuch is required to make the confession “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God”, before he is baptised. Paul asserts in 1Corinthians 12:3: “No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost”. Obviously this was another New Testament creed. So we can see that by the use of a creed, a person made his public profession of his faith. The creed was a summary of essential truths. This concept is further developed in 1Corinthians 15:1-8 which contains a fuller summary of the Gospel “which I preached unto you, and which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures: and that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve...”. It would seem that this summary of the Gospel was in common circulation.

Faithful sayings

The faithful sayings of the Pastoral Epistles fit into a similar category. They must have been current sayings. The best known of them is the first: “This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief” (1Tim.1:15). Timothy was also encouraged, “The things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also” (2Tim.2:2). There was a body of truth which had to be passed on, not simply the Scriptures. Earlier Paul had said “Hold fast the

form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus" (2Tim.1:13). So in biblical times summaries of the central teachings of the faith were passed on.

Church History

Early Church – Teaching

The early church had various creeds or summaries of the faith such as the Old Roman Creed until eventually what is known today as the Apostles' Creed in present form emerged by the end of the fifth century. It states: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth: and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord; who was conceived of the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven; and sitteth at 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". As can be seen many of the great teachings of the Scriptures are expressed in these words. Creeds such as this appear to have been used at baptism when the catechumen or convert who had been taught would repeat the words and thus declare commitment to the central tenets of the Christian faith. Before the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, books were rare and very expensive. The teaching had largely to be done by word of mouth and these creeds provided excellent easily remembered summaries of the faith.

Opposing error

Creeds not only had a rôle in teaching and the positive presentation of truth but also played an important part in identifying and rejecting heresy. For example an ecumenical council composed of some 300 bishops or ministers was held in Nicea in 325AD from which the Nicene Creed came. This council was called because of the heresy of Arianism which asserted that the Son was not eternal like the Father. Arius argued that if the Son is begotten of the Father, He must come after Him. That is logic, but it is not Scriptural teaching. It emphasises the importance of submitting reason to revelation. The Nicene Creed rejected this heresy and asserted that the Lord Jesus Christ was "of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God; begotten not made, of one substance with the Father", and it anathematised those who said "There was, when He was not, and, before He was begotten, He was not". The Council of Chalcedon which met in 451 dealt with the person of Christ as over against Nestorianism which taught that there were two persons in Christ and Eutychus who taught that there was only one nature in Christ. Chalcedon asserted that our Lord has "two natures in one person" "unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly and inseparably".

It is interesting in passing to note that the ecumenical meetings of today confuse doctrines and try to find ambiguous words into which anyone can import the meaning he likes. They play down the truth. The ecumenical councils of the past however struggled to find words which pin-pointed errors and rejected every heresy.

Reformation

The Reformation was a time of questioning, of religious reflection, of rediscovery of the Scriptures and the great truths of the Bible. It was a theological high point for the church and from it came the confessions which are still so highly valued by the godly and faithful today. The Reformed confessions carried on the work of the early church in clearly defining the truth and exposing error. The different churches produced their own confessions. The Church of England produced the Thirty-nine Articles, the Scottish Church the Scots' Confession, the Dutch Church the Belgic Confession which along with the Heidelberg Catechism and the Cannons of Dordt are the Standards of the Dutch Reformed Church. Eventually the Westminster Confession was composed in 1643-46 and is surely the greatest and best. Independents use it in the form of the Savoy Declaration of 1658 and the Baptists in the 1689 Baptist Confession.

Objections raised to Confessions

We would like now to look at the various objections which are raised to confessions of faith. Many Christians today do not think that they are beneficial to the church and certainly not, if they are seen as mandatory and church leaders are required to sign them and adhere completely to them as confessions of their own faith.

1. We have the Bible. Is that not enough? As long as we all believe the Bible, that should be sufficient.

True it is important to adhere to the Bible, but most heretics also claim to adhere to the Bible. For example Jehovah's Witnesses claim to believe the whole Bible. However because the Westminster Confession clearly asserts the Scriptural teaching on say the Trinity they could not accept the Confession. The Bible does not use the term "Trinity" and so they feel able to say that they believe the Bible. Since the Confession, aware of the heresy, is blunt on the subject they are found out and condemned by it.

2. A Confession is a human document. The Bible is the inspired, infallible word of God.

True the confession must not be placed on the same level as Scripture. It is always to be a subordinate standard. At the end of the day our confession is judged by the Scriptures. However the fact that it is a fallible human document does not mean it is useless. Preached sermons are fallible and human yet they are blessed by God to the saving of souls.

3. Theology does not matter. What matters is life, the work of evangelism and showing love.

True practical godliness is very important, but beliefs are also important. One should not be set against another. Paul's epistles normally lay out the doctrine first and then on the basis of that doctrine the Christians are exhorted to action and a certain way of life. The New Testament is full of warnings against false doctrine, eg "But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways" (2Pet.2:1-2). Correct theology does matter. Heresy damns souls.

4. Beliefs are a private matter. You believe what you like and I have a right to believe what I like.

This is certainly a very common attitude today. It is the spirit of our postmodern pluralistic age, but it is quite different to the teaching of the Scriptures. Paul states to Titus: "These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority" (Tit.2:15). False teaching is not to be tolerated. Those who hold these false teachings are to be opposed with all the authority that Titus can commend and if that was true in the past it is true also today.

5. Some say doctrine divides. Who cares about hair-splitting and arguing over words.

True, doctrine does divide. But it divides between right and wrong, between the broad road to hell and the narrow road to heaven. The Apostle says to Timothy: "Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee" (1Tim.4:16). Doctrine is vital to salvation. No one can get to heaven without good doctrine.

6. Some argue that we should have very short limited confessions or rather statements of faith which simply list the bare essentials – the sort of thing that some missionary societies have.

There are of course some things more important than others but all the truth is important. There is indeed a rôle for short statements of faith, where different churches and individual Christians combine in para-church organisations. However as churches we must remember the teaching of Christ who said: "Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled" (Matt.5:18). The details of God's word are very important. "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, throughly furnished unto all good works" (2Tim.3:16-17). We are to aim to confess the riches of God's truth rather than the mere bare bones.

7. Some will allow only a kind of lowest common denominator confession, around which everyone can agree. The wording should be ambiguous to allow the maximum number to sign.

This idea undermines truth. Such a confession is worthless because it is ambiguous. It makes discipline for heresy impossible, and anyone can believe what he likes and the church's confession allows him that scope. But Paul will not allow that freedom to Hymeneus and Alexander. Rather he delivered them "unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme". (1Tim.1:20).

Why do we need a Confession?

1. Church's beliefs

A confession specifies in propositional form what the church believes. It gathers the Scriptures teaching on the various points. It is useful for ourselves and all the members of the church to know what we as a church believe and to be able to turn to this manual when questions arise.

2. Evangelism

A confession can also be given to anyone outside the church who is interested in what the church believes and from it they will know immediately the church's view on all the central teachings of Scripture.

3. Instruction of young

A confession provides an excellent manual for teaching the young or new converts. There in summary form the teachings of Scripture can be found. In a good confession Scripture proof texts will also be given and the student can study these along with the propositions based upon them.

4. Specifies errors rejected

A confession specifies errors which the church opposes. This is very important in a world where many false teachers are moving freely around. Nowadays there are all sorts of dangerous books and magazines readily available. The internet also disseminates error.

5. Discipline of heretics

A confession has an important rôle in the disciplining of heretics. There are heretics around in the ministry and eldership today as there were in biblical times. Indeed they are far more numerous and subtle today. These heretics should be opposed as they were in New Testament times.

6. Statement signed by church leaders

A confession provides a statement of faith which those seeking ordination have to sign. It is a means, as much as that is possible, of keeping the church pure. It guarantees as far as man can do a supply of sound ministers and elders.

7. Basis for church union

A confession provides a basis for church union and fellowship. Church union should not be at the expense of truth but rather a gathering around the truth. Sister churches are those which hold to the same confession. Two churches can naturally and profitably come together when they hold in the same way to the same confession.

Limitations of Confessions

We must note that even the best confession of faith has limitations.

1. A confession is a human document and therefore error is possible. It must not be regarded as infallible.
2. A confession is only a subordinate standard. Scripture is the supreme standard. The authority of a confession comes from its conformity to the Scriptures. The foundation of the church is the "apostles and prophets" not the Reformed theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
3. A confession has constantly to be checked against the Scriptures. As churches we should be constantly reforming in the light of God's written word.
4. A confession ideally should be changing with the passing centuries but more in the sense of getting longer rather than the doctrine itself changing. The needed emphasis of a confession changes with the centuries. New heresies emerge which should be condemned by it. For example liberalism which opposes the authority and infallibility of the Scriptures and the Charismatic Movement with its emphasis on the so called "baptism of the Spirit", "tongue speaking", miracles and new revelations were not around in their modern form in the seventeenth century. Yet it is difficult to adjust the historic confessions because we live in such a theologically weak age. Also most new ideas or theologies, including those mentioned, are just old heresies in new clothes.
5. A confession cannot totally guarantee the orthodoxy of all who profess to accept it. Churches depend on the honesty of those who sign their adherence to the confession. Man cannot read the heart. And people can change. They may initially have subscribed to a confession honestly but their views change and sometimes they are for a variety of reasons not willing to own up to the change. Perhaps they might lose their manse or salary.

Conclusion

Despite their limitations we thank God for confessions of faith such as the Westminster Confession. They have been a wonderful blessing to the churches down through the centuries. In teaching, in asserting the truth and in opposing heresy they have done a great work. Study these confessions for yourself especially the Westminster Confession of Faith (and the Savoy Declaration of the Congregationalists and the Baptist Confession of 1689) and the catechisms based upon it. Value the truth. Know what your church believes and why. Discuss it among your friends. Share it with others. Be proud of it as the truth of God which will stand for ever. Remember Paul's words to Titus "In doctrine showing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, sound speech that cannot be condemned; that he that is of a contrary part may be ashamed having no evil thing to say of you" (Tit.2:7).

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