

THE CREEDAL IMPERATIVE: A REVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

Visit most church and parachurch websites and you sense a reluctance to be any more specific about beliefs, let alone an actual “Statement of Faith,” other than to simply state, “We believe in God and the Bible.” There seems to be an endemic fear in the modern church that, to present even a nominally clear and ample outline that describes organizational belief, would somehow drive someone away from further investigation or inquiry with impressions of extreme narrowness. Yet, there is also the possibility that the leadership of such a church may not actually know with certainty what it is they believe, and hence, silence.

Carl Trueman argues in his book *The Creedal Imperative* that creeds and confessions¹ are not only useful, but also biblical and necessary to the life of the church, stating in his introduction, “I want to argue that creeds and confessions are, in fact, necessary for the well-being of the church, and that churches that claim not to have them place themselves at a permanent disadvantage when it comes to holding fast to that form of sound words which was so precious to the aging Paul as he advised his young protégé, Timothy.”² Trueman has also conveniently divided his work into just 6 chapters, aside

¹ I recognize that the terms “creeds” and “confessions” are rather interchangeable in common vocabulary among confessional Christians, but I have chose to use the term “creed” for clarity in light of this particular book’s chapter and the more explicit official definition.

² Carl Trueman, *A Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), p.20.

from his introduction and conclusion. This is how I've chosen to divide my this review as well, as we dissect his assertions in more detail.

Chapter One: "The Cultural Case against Creeds and Confessions"

As Trueman provides the backdrop of rebellious spirits to biblical authority, he makes an interesting observation that, "...all Christians engage in confessional synthesis; the difference is simply whether one adheres to a public confession, subject to public scrutiny, or to a private confession that is, by its very nature, immune to such examination" (21). Emphasized in detail in this first chapter are the competing voices that consistently seek to tear down any valuation of historic life and practice of the church, from science to consumerism to pragmatism. Each one takes a heavy toll in manipulating the minds of people within and outside the walls of the church, teaching that, "a Christianity that is committed to truth claims... is profoundly at odds with the cultural current" (45).

Trueman makes clear that he does not lump together with the liberal mysticist the pastor or average church member who professes "no creed but the Bible." There can certainly be legitimate concern in even the most infant believer of holding a statement of faith evenly or even superior to Scripture. However, he draws upon the severity of the situation with this statement: "Modern culture has not really rendered creeds and confession untrue; far less has it rendered them unbiblical. But it has rendered them implausible and distasteful" (48). Due to the constant infiltration of these worldly conclusions, this leaves the imperative in the hands every of believer to carefully examine and evaluate whether these influences have indeed hardened the heart towards public statements of belief.

Chapter Two: “The Foundations of Creedalism”

Perhaps most intriguing about Trueman’s case in chapter two is his emphasis on the nature of God himself as a God who does speak (52), demarcating this building block of relationship between God and man (53). This is demonstrated with examples from Genesis, Elisha in 2 Kings, Amos’ prophecy, and at Jesus’ baptism in Mark 1. He smartly contrasts this with the obvious fact that idols of man’s device are absolutely silent (56).

The significance for emphasizing the importance of words is that, “If words are God’s way of being present with his people and working among them, words are also the human means of responding to God and of communicating with each other about God” (57). Considered in this context is the annual rehearsal of the Passover ceremony of Exodus 12, the speaking ministries Old Testament prophets, along with Paul’s insistence in 1 Corinthians 1:21 that the power of preaching is based in the message it communicates. He states that, “There is no other way of communicating this message that can bypass the use of words” (60).

Fundamental to this understanding is recognizing the construction of the human psyche and capacity to understand the linguistic aspect of God’s revelation. This is because man is made in the image of God, and God is a God who speaks; thus man hears God. Trueman writes, “All are addressed by the same revelation of the same God, and all are called to respond to that revelation” (64). This undergirds the commitment and response of man to God’s decrees, and man’s attempt to express even the most basic elements of the Christian faith.

Critical to his argument in this chapter, is his pushback on man’s rebellious nature towards authority. Again entreating Paul’s New Testament wisdom, we are impressed

with the divine role of the church and the members' responsibility to submit to its authority, with Christ as its head. From Romans 10:9-10, the case is made that Paul sees "credible Christians profession as involving a doctrinal belief..." (67). In the negative, Paul warns in Romans 16:17 against those who are devisive because they have left sound teaching. Finally, in his letters to Timothy and Titus, Paul is seen encouraging these shepherds to teach with stewardship³ (1 Timothy 1:4), hold to "the trustworthy word as taught" (Titus 1:9), and to "teach what accords with sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1).

Not only is elder authority in the church directly linked to subjection to Christ's rule, but we are confronted also with Paul's words in 2 Timothy 1:13, "Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." Trueman makes a compelling point in saying that, "Paul also highlights the *form* of the words used here" (74). Theologically, we are beneficiaries of time-tested vocabulary that has helpful for the church to understand complex doctrines, such as "Trinity"; and pastorally, creeds can help the church become familiar with terms and phrases in Scripture such as "atonement" or "election."

Chapter Three: "The Early Church"

Perhaps the most contentious objection to a stated creed is the lack of any such delineation in Scripture. But frankly, this should not be an issue since Scripture has no need of a creed within itself. Only as the church began to spread in the first few centuries and encounter various heresies rooted in isogesis and harsh elder rule, did there arise a

³ Trueman notes the similar terminology "management language" (p.69) found in the 1 Timothy 1:4, with the qualifications of an overseer 1 Timothy 3:1-7 which implies management and true teaching are connected.

need for a unified statement of true doctrine. Trueman quotes letters from Ignatius, Tertullian and Irenaeus who felt pressured to respond to such heresies infiltrating the church, and summarized various portions of biblical doctrine. By 200 AD, he demonstrates that in a baptism account given by Hippolytus of Rome (170-236), we see a basic creedal structure for baptismal candidates (87). This continued formation of doctrinal statements is seen fleshed out further in the widely used “Apostles’ Creed”⁴ that is still in use even today in modern liturgy.

He also gives a historical sketch is given of the first four ecumenical councils from 325-451 AD which were important to Protestants in clearly defining a few key doctrinal pillars of belief. While brief, this served to impress upon the reader the indebtedness the modern church should feel to ancient theological discussion, and that even clarifications of a single Greek word can have rippling effects for centuries. These early ancient creeds all sought to identify who God is, seeking to answer the most basic questions of Christian life and practice.

Chapter Four: “Classical Protestant Confessions”

The ability of Trueman to briefly present pertinent information of such well documented historical events such as the Three Forms of Unity, the Westminster Confession and the 1689 London Baptist Confession was impressive. His purpose was clearly not to take the reader on a detailed study of each document, but rather to briefly sketch the theological and political pressures present in their respective time periods

⁴ Trueman interestingly notes that the first reference to it as the *Apostles’ Creed* occurs in a letter from Ambrose of Milan to Rome in 389, “a reference that suggests it was clearly of some vintage by that point in time” (89).

However, I did find an area of disagreement that I could not resolve. When discussing the Book of Concord documents among Lutheranism, Trueman uses them as an example of the importance of sacramental theology, in particular, the Lord's Supper. Breaking from many in even Reformed Christianity, Lutherans "placed the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist at the forefront of their doctrinal concerns," which coincides with the willingness to engage in ecumenism with Roman Catholicism. The statement Trueman that Luther was right to break with mainline Protestantism in his contention that belief in the Real Presence was "essential to the faith", and "it would have been even more regrettable had he agreed to live and let live with the Reformed because he did not see that the matter was at all important." (118). My contention lies in the inconsistency he permits in making this concession to Luther's unusual viewpoint, whereas in other parts of the book he argues for less fragmentation within Reformed Protestantism.

Chapter Five: "Confession as Praise"

One of the compelling arguments in the book is found in the fifth chapter, powerfully summed up in the statement, "One could make the argument that Christian theology as a whole is one long, extended reflection upon the meaning and significance of that most basic doxological declaration, 'Jesus is Lord!' and thus an attempt to provide a framework for understanding Christian praise." (135) Trueman makes a compelling appeal to various New Testament passages that Christian godliness rooted in theology directly leads to doxology. For instance, in 1 Timothy 1:15-17 he says, "In attacking false teachers, Paul inevitably asserts true teaching as the alternative, but for Paul such assertion can never stand on its own and for its own sake: it moves him inevitably to praise." (138)

As a music minister myself, the doxological implications of rich doctrinal content in corporate worship is paramount. I found myself continually nodding my head and welling up with a sense of comradery in reading the various ailments the modern church suffers in this realm. “Spontaneity” and “authenticity” have become seemingly authoritative buzzwords in dictating the stylings and structures of contemporary worship. He contrasts these with the three advantages of intimately including creeds and confession during corporate worship, concluding by asking the question, “Why would we not use them?” (158)

Chapter Six: “On the Usefulness of Creeds and Confessions”

In his final chapter, Trueman sought to give food for thought instead of an exhaustive list of defenses. The point that seemed most effective to close his book-long argument, is the idea that expected doctrinal competence among congregations can be best represented by the employment of a creed or confession. “For a church to hold to a creed or confession, to require subscription to the same from her office-bearers, is to send a signal to the congregation about what the church considers to be important in her doctrinal life.” (178) This is not to restrict membership to those who are perhaps “educationally challenged”, nor is it to set a low bar of satisfaction in doctrinal understanding. “A church confession not only sets before the congregation a list of doctrinal priorities and demonstrates how their priorities fit together into an overarching framework, it also represents an aspirational ideal of what the eldership hopes will be the appropriate level of doctrinal competence for the congregation.” (179)

CONCLUSION

In this postmodern age, there is a desperate need for churches to unequivocally

state what they believe the Bible teaches. Carl Trueman's book is needed and should be read by church leaders, those pursuing leadership roles and the church at large. His book is a helpful tool at a time when so many in the church at large are content to be theologically anemic. Building upon a biblical foundation, he asserts that history attests to the usage and necessity of confessional statements. Practically speaking, how can the church faithfully fulfill her commission if she cannot or will not fly her colors at full mast? Upon which grounds can there be unity in the church without a common consensus of belief? And can the church really be salt and light if it is not clear about its message and practice?