

**THE NEED FOR CREED:**  
**The Locus of Confessions in the Life of the Church**

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## Introduction

Contemporary theological attitudes notwithstanding, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in Reformed theology is considerably rich. Princeton theologian, B.B. Warfield, called John Calvin the “theologian of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>1</sup> This is somewhat surprising, since any mention of the Holy Spirit in our contemporary theological context conjures up notions of ecstatic speech, healings and various other “miracles,” and the unexpected satisfaction of immediate felt needs, most often in deviation from what is understood to be the natural course of events—all of which seem to us incommensurate with the theology of John Calvin and the tradition that follows him. In an era where charismatic expressions of Christianity “represent the single fastest growing version of Christianity today,”<sup>2</sup> it is not surprising that “the work of the Spirit is easily cast into the charismatic mold.”<sup>3</sup>

The Reformed view of the Holy Spirit distinguishes itself from this popular, charismatic understanding by insisting that God the Spirit works through a variety of means that are ordinarily consistent with the natural order of things, in stark opposition to the “Spirit-filled” supernaturalism of charismatic theology. A believer’s union with Christ’s death and resurrection through baptism is accomplished by “the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy

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1. B.B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1956), 484–487, cited in R. Michael Allen, *Reformed Theology*, *Doing Theology* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2010), 133.

2. Allen, *Reformed Theology*, 133. According to John D. Woodbridge and Frank A. James III, “one of the most important religious developments to give shape and substance to twentieth-century global Christianity is the Pentecostal movement and its more contemporary and refined offspring, the ‘charismatic movement.’ Reputable scholars assert that in 2000, Pentecostal numbers worldwide were increasing at the rate of nearly 19 million a year. One scholar has concluded that the Pentecostal surge is the most significant religious movement since the birth of Islam or the Protestant Reformation and that Pentecostals may well by now ‘account for one of every three Christians in the world.’” John D. Woodbridge and Frank A. James III, *Church History Volume 2: From Pre-Reformation to the Present Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 694.

3. Allen, *Reformed Theology*, 133.

Christ and all his benefits.”<sup>4</sup> True, the Holy Spirit operates in the individual believer, but this work is coupled with the external means of the church and its sanctioned sacraments, and secondarily through the means of such things as confessions. With respect to confessions in particular, the Reformed view of ecclesiastical authority, and of the confessional formulas that serve to mediate it, is a derivative of this understanding of the Holy Spirit’s role. In short, the Holy Spirit makes “provisions for Christians to know and testify rightly about God.”<sup>5</sup> The Spirit’s agency works *concurrently* with human agency, and as the “Lord and giver of life,”<sup>6</sup> the Spirit endows the individual believer and the corporate community with the vitality to promote the gospel through the act of confession. Theological confessions are legitimate and necessary in the life of the church because they derive from the church’s responsibility to perpetually confess the truth about the gospel according to the Word and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. One challenge in sustaining such a view is to demonstrate how it squares with the Reformed doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. But it can be shown that not only are confessions consistent with a high view of Scripture, *Sola Scriptura* turns out to be the very foundation on which the legitimacy and necessity of confessions rest.

### ***Sola Scriptura* and the Legitimacy of Confessions**

At the heart of Reformed theology is the insistence that the Word of God is of primary importance. Indeed, it was in the development of the Reformed confessions that the principle of

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4. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. XX-XXI, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 537.

5. Allen, *Reformed Theology*, 134.

6. *The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed* (A.D. 381).

*Sola Scriptura* was hammered out.<sup>7</sup> Both the *Ten Theses of Berne* (1528) and the *Westminster Confession* (1643), though “separated by a century and a channel, begin by attesting the singular authority of the speech of God.”<sup>8</sup> This is significant in that it indicates continuity within the Reformed tradition on this point—and continuity is often a sign of theological stability.

A primary concern among the Reformed divines was to ground their entire project upon Scripture, not only as the ultimate *source* of theology, but also as the *model* for theological method—how one should go about doing theology. Michael Allen notes, “As the final authority for Christian faith and practice, [Scripture] must also speak to its own interpretation. Method cannot be construed pre-theologically.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, theological methodology, itself, must be derived from Scripture. This Reformed “Scripture principle,” as it may be called,<sup>10</sup> is the skeleton upon which the whole body of Reformed doctrine hangs. So, on this view, if one wants to know from whence he comes, who God is, how to know Him, how to properly relate to Him, what constitutes meaning in life, what human relationships should be like, what a family is, what the distinction between right and wrong action is, how a spiritual community should function, even how he should understand the Bible itself, etc., one ultimately must reckon with the teaching of Holy Writ.

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7. Allen, *Reformed Theology*, 7.

8. Allen, *Reformed Theology*, 7. The first of the *Ten Theses of Berne* states: “The holy Christian Church, whose only Head is Christ, is born of the Word of God, and abides in the same, and listens not to the voice of a stranger.” Philip Schaff, *The History of the Reformation*, 3rd ed., vol. 8, bk. 2, *History of the Christian Church* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910), And Chapter 1, article 1 of the *WCF* states that the Holy Scriptures are “most necessary.”

9. Allen, *Reformed Theology*, 135.

10. *Sola Scriptura* is often referred to as the “formal principle” of the Reformation to distinguish it from the “material principle” of *Sola Fide*.

Yet, it may *prima facie* seem strange that alongside such a high view of Scripture there exists a robust view of the role of confessions and ecclesiastical authority within the Reformed tradition. Does not the Scripture principle outlined above preclude the authority of confessions and the ecclesiastical traditions they spawn?<sup>11</sup> Not according to the Ten Theses of Berne (1528):

The Church of Christ makes no laws or commandments without God's word. Hence all human traditions, which are called ecclesiastical commandments, are binding upon us only in so far as they are based on and commanded by God's word.<sup>12</sup>

Here, the proper function and authority of confessions is at the same time upheld and moderated by the ultimate authority of the Word of God. Reformed theology gives legitimacy to confessions so long as they are mediated by and subordinate to Scripture. "The creed is a good servant but a bad master; it assists, but cannot replace, the act of confession. [...] [It] has the authority of the herald, not the magistrate."<sup>13</sup>

John Webster defines a creed or confessional formula as "an indication of the gospel that is set before us in the scriptural witness."<sup>14</sup> Notice the way this definition balances the authority of both Scripture and confession, but preserves the Scripture's place of prominence. Also notice what this definition *excludes* from the notion of confession: it is not "the teaching of the church, nor the commitments and self-understandings of those who make use of the confession to profess their faith. [...] A confession is most properly an indication of the gospel."<sup>15</sup> As such, it functions

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11. The radical reformers, beginning with the Anabaptists, generally answered "yes" to this question.

12. Schaff, *The History of the Reformation*.

13. John Webster, "Confession and Confessions," in *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001), 120, 130.

14. Webster, 124.

15. Webster, 124–125.

authoritatively, giving warrant to tradition while being harnessed by the preeminence of Scripture as the primary rule of faith. So, rather than being static, the *act* of confessing is an ongoing, binding activity of the spiritual community of believers. Webster links the necessity of confessional formulations to the act of confession as a spiritual duty of the church. He says that “the act of confession is a responsive, not a spontaneous act. [...] [It] is an episode in the conflict between God and sin that is at the center of the drama of salvation.”<sup>16</sup>

In similar fashion, Kevin Vanhoozer (an admirer of Webster<sup>17</sup>) employs a helpful analogy by suggesting that the relationship that a drama script has to its performance illustrates the relationship between Scripture and tradition, specifically in the way that it applies to the church’s ever-reforming, ever-confessing nature.<sup>18</sup> Allen summarizes this view, stating that

...each [is] needed in its own way for rightly *performing* the church’s role in its contemporary setting. The script is the starting point and guide, but the audience pays for the *performance* of that script. So today’s churches join with previous casts in putting flesh on this story by playing their parts. Thus, there is a tradition of *acting* out a part. No understudy would want to play a role without recourse to the performance of the previous star; literally, one studies under this person. So it is with the ongoing practice of discipleship and formation; the church is being reared by her ancestors.<sup>19</sup> (italics mine)

Likewise, Webster claims that “confession is act or event before it is document. [...] Confession is a permanently occurring event.”<sup>20</sup> It is plain that God appointed his church to be a *witness* to the truth of the gospel—indeed, to be the “pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15).

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16. Webster, “Confession and Confessions,” 122.

17. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “John Webster: A Testimonial,” Carl F.H. Henry Center for Theological Understanding, June 2016, accessed May 27, 2017, <http://henrycenter.tiu.edu/2016/06/john-webster-a-testimonial/>.

18. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 138.

19. Allen, *Reformed Theology*, 138.

20. Webster, “Confession and Confessions,” 123.

This necessarily implies that “the church is to testify constantly to the whole body of revealed precepts and doctrines, and not to parts or fragments only.”<sup>21</sup> In his swan song, the apostle Paul commands Timothy to “follow the pattern of sound words that you have heard” from the apostles, and “what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 1:13, 2:2). These commands admit to the *witnessing* function of the church.

One fundamental dimension of the church’s witnessing activity is the public ministry of the Word. God has sanctioned, as a means of grace, the explanation and dissemination of divine truths by lawful preachers in the church, just as Ezra and the priests “read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (Neh. 8:8). Being entrusted with the doctrines of the gospel, these shepherds are to “reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching [=doctrine]” (2 Tim. 4:2). In this capacity, the pastor-preacher is exercising “his uninspired expositions of what he believes to be divine truth, that is to say, his creed.”<sup>22</sup> Arguing *a fortiori*, Robert Lewis Dabney reasons that “If such human creeds, when composed by a single teacher and delivered orally, *extempore*, are proper means of instruction for the church, by the stronger reason must those be proper and scriptural which are

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21. Robert L. Dabney, “The Doctrinal Contents of the Confession—Its Fundamental And Regulative Ideas, and the Necessity and Value of Creeds,” in *Memorial Volume of the Westminster Assembly, 1647-1897*, Containing eleven addresses delivered before the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, at Charlotte, N.C., in May, 1897. In commemoration of the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Westminster Assembly, and of the formation of the Westminster Standards, 2nd ed. (The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America, 1897), 108.

22. Dabney, 107.

the careful, mature, and joint productions [i.e., confessions] of learned and godly pastors, delivered with the accuracy of written documents.”<sup>23</sup>

Even still the question remains: How does the Scripture principle bear upon the dynamic understanding of confessions as the ongoing, witnessing (confessing) ministry of the church? Scripture’s authority is not intrinsic; rather, it is a derivation of the active work of the Holy Spirit in and through it, giving it its ultimate power and authority. This fact is the fused link between the Reformed Scripture principle and the validity of confessions. It becomes clear, then, that a thorough trinitarian theology must undergird a coherent view of confessions and their function in the church.<sup>24</sup> As was noted in the introduction, Reformed theology boasts of a rich, nuanced doctrine of the Holy Spirit. In contrast to the “otherworldly supernaturalism” of charismatic theology, the Reformed view of the Spirit recognizes that God the Spirit gives life through “varied instruments,”<sup>25</sup> not simply through direct, immediately observable, spontaneous “miracles.” Just as the Spirit brings forth and works through the means of Scripture, so He also constitutes and works through confessions, yet in a different, albeit powerful, way. Webster concurs: “Revelation is enacted and declared salvation, the open and visible hand of God’s mercy. And what revelation generates is the church, the assembly of those called to new life... Confession flows from this electing and life-giving self-manifestation.”<sup>26</sup> It is the Spirit’s activity through Scripture that

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23. Dabney, “The Doctrinal Contents of the Confession—Its Fundamental And Regulative Ideas, and the Necessity and Value of Creeds,” 107.

24. “...a thorough description of the church’s act of confession must be rooted in a trinitarian account of God’s self-manifestation. As Father, Son, and Spirit, God alone is its origin, its accomplishment, and its realization. In a real sense, therefore, God alone is the origin, accomplishment, and realization of the act of confession.” Webster, “Confession and Confessions,” 122.

25. Allen, *Reformed Theology*, 134.

26. Webster, “Confession and Confessions,” 122.



renders confessions and their authority viable for the church.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, “Holy Scripture is prior to and superior to all acts of confession.”<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, confession, as an ongoing spiritual activity, is “a human echo of the electing mercy of God”—it is “an act of loyalty.”<sup>29</sup> This secondary role of confession is closely related to how pastoral authority functions in the life of a congregation. “Pastoral authority is derived and secondary, whereas that of Jesus Christ is intrinsic and primary.”<sup>30</sup> The mediating principle at work between them is the Holy Scriptures. Pastors are representatives of Jesus’ rule as it was “passed along to his apostles and their followers.”<sup>31</sup> This principle of mediation by the Spirit through the Word is the conceptual basis from which we must understand the authority of Christian tradition by means of confessions. In this way, the Reformed perspective on ecclesiastical authority and tradition proves to be highly nuanced in comparison to those of other Christian traditions. Much effort has been given to carefully situate the nature and function of confessions within the revealed witness of Scripture and to understand them ultimately as the result of the continued work of the Holy Spirit among the people of God.

The real danger for the modern Reformed church is not confessions *qua* confessions, but rather *nebulous* confessions. There is a temptation to read, say, the *Westminster Confession* as the Supreme Court Justices read the United States Constitution: “their eisegesis is based on very

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27. “...the act of confession originates in revelation.” Webster, “Confession and Confessions,” 121.

28. Webster, 125.

29. Webster, 125–126.

30. Allen, *Reformed Theology*, 144.

31. Allen, 144.

nebulous and unexamined oral traditions”<sup>32</sup>—they want the name, but not the doctrines. Along these same lines, there seems to be an attitude of ambivalence toward the role of confessions in the life of the church. Though accustomed to the practice of citing, say, the *Nicene Creed* in a corporate worship setting, some Christians likely do not see such a practice as essential to their worship or broader corporate life, if they consider it at all. In keeping with their Reformed outlook, they certainly would not object to the *idea* of confession; otherwise, they would join a different Christian tradition. But though they would not object, they likely do not have a thoughtful understanding of how or why confessions function as they do within the broader context of ecclesiastical authority and tradition.<sup>33</sup> The result of this ambivalence is that incremental theological drift can occur largely without notice until some watershed moment reveals the gap. Lewis Schenck thinks this is precisely what has happened with the Reformed doctrine of infant baptism (as of 1940!):

Those who pride themselves on being the orthodox are really the unorthodox. The Presbyterian Church has a glorious doctrine received through the medium of John Calvin and the Westminster Standards. Yet the Church as a whole does not know it. The historic doctrine of the Church concerning children in the covenant and the significance of infant baptism has been to a large extent secretly undermined, hidden by the intrusion of an aberration from this doctrine.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Necessity of Confessions in the Life of the Church**

Samuel Miller, in his classic address, *On The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions*, makes the assertion that creeds/confessions are “not only lawful and expedient, but

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32. Douglas Wilson, *Reformed is Not Enough: Recovering the Objectivity of the Covenant* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2002), 52.

33. My evidence for this suspicion is purely anecdotal and based on personal experience and intuition.

34. Lewis Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1940), 158.

also indispensably necessary to the harmony and purity of the visible Church.”<sup>35</sup> Webster suggests that a renewal of the confessional life is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for the renewal of the life of the church.<sup>36</sup> Surely it is the Word and Spirit that creates and renews the church. Yet, the “creedal rendering of the gospel” is the antidote to “half-baked cultural analysis,” a simplistic understanding of the Holy Spirit’s role, a misguided notion of authority, and a stilted view of the act of confession that fails to regard it as “one of the primary and defining activities of the church.”<sup>37</sup> Because confession is first of all an *act* tethered to the work of the Holy Spirit, confessions derived from this spiritual activity are a means of grace for the edification of the church and the exaltation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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35. Samuel Miller, *The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions* (Dallas, Texas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1996), 3.

36. Webster, “Confession and Confessions,” 131.

37. Webster, 119, 131.

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