

# Theology Matters

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## Who Needs Confessions of Faith? A Reformed and Ecumenical Response

by Richard Burnett

Why do we have confessions of faith? There are many reasons. Some are not so obvious. But for Protestants the first and most important reason is simple: We have confessions not because we want to say *more* than the Bible says. We have them because we do not want to say *less*. Confessions arise as a result of a crisis in the church that requires a decision to be made. They emerge when the truth of the gospel is consistently contested at a specific point (or points) over a sustained period of time. Confessions, in other words, emerge out of persistent conflict over what the Scriptures teach about the Christian faith and living out that faith.

For example, the church from early on was confronted within and without by groups who denied that God had really assumed human flesh and died on the cross. They believed that Jesus Christ did not really assume human flesh or die on the cross, nor, as the Son of God, could he. To think that he did was offensive, indeed, “foolishness to the Greeks,” who had definite ideas about what deity could and could not do, which is why many said he only *seemed* or *appeared* to assume human flesh and die on the cross. These people were known as *docetists*, which derives from a Greek word [that](#) means “to seem” or “to appear.”

So the church was forced to confess the truth of the apostolic witness and refute this false teaching. [This](#) is why the Apostles’ Creed is not content to say that Jesus Christ was “crucified,” but that he was “crucified, dead, and buried.” You might think saying he was crucified was sufficient. After all, if you get crucified, especially by the Romans, you are dead. And if you are dead, one

way or another, you usually get buried. But the creed emphasizes the point that he was “crucified, dead, and buried,” as if to say: “Do you get it? Don’t miss the point. He was dead, not just a little bit dead or almost dead, but really dead.” The Creed confronts other misunderstandings and offenses to Greek sensibilities such as when it affirms “the resurrection of the body.”

The Creed eventually served practical purposes as well. It provided a brief summary of the faith and served as a baptismal formula for catechumens. Luther said: “Christian truth could not possibly be put into a shorter and clearer statement,” which is why he recommended Christians say it often, especially in times of temptation. Saying it can clear the mind and give one perspective. But the basic reason the Creed emerged was to witness to the truth of the gospel in face of conflict with falsehood, unbelief, and persistent questioning. The history of dogma suggests every line of the Creed was contested. Every phrase was in one way or another challenged. Thus, the Creed’s primary purpose was to bear witness to the truth about God.

The Apostles’ Creed did not emerge as some sort of clever marketing strategy. It did not emerge because church leaders thought the time had come when it

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would be useful to narrow things down a bit and have a short and sweet summary of the faith that might appeal to the masses. Nor did it occur to early church leaders that they were smart enough to come up with one. They knew the Christian faith was far too rich, complex, and beautiful to be reduced to such a truncated little summary. Certainly it proved useful and is to this day. But the Creed emerged not out of convenience or for the sake of utility but out of necessity. It emerged because the truth of the gospel was at stake and the church was compelled to confess.

So also did the Nicene, Niceno-Constantinopolitan, and Athanasian Creeds, the Chalcedonian Definition and other creeds emerge. Each emerged out of conflict. Each was born of blood, pain, and strife. Each emerged because the truth of God was at stake, the truth about God's being and act in Jesus Christ was persistently contested and, therefore, the truth of the gospel was stake. And lest we think the Nicene Creed was really much to do about nothing or about arcane, abstract, speculative metaphysical theories that are irrelevant as far as "real ministry" is concerned, note in the middle of it the phrase "*for us and for our salvation.*" The church recognized that nothing could be more relevant to pastoral ministry than understanding and confessing who God is and what he has done for us in Christ.

Christians, of course, were not the first people to talk about God. What Arius and others said about God made a lot of sense to a lot of people. They too had their ideas about God and what he could and could not do. But at the end of the day what Arius and many other pious-minded people said did not make sense of what Scripture says. The church recognized it might seem like only an iota's worth of difference to some, but the gospel really does stand or fall on the truth of who God is and what he has done in Jesus Christ and if we go wrong here we go wrong everywhere. So in order not to say less than Scripture says, the church realized it had to say more. And there have been many times since when the church has been tempted to say less.

Such was the case in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Reformation was born of a rediscovery of Scripture's message and authority. In 1516 Erasmus published a Greek New Testament that came into the hands of scholars trained in "the new learning" of the humanist tradition. These scholars quickly realized that they had been taught many things by the church that were not true, according to Scripture. Some were over weighty matters, such as the doctrine of justification, which had been based on poor translations of the Greek in the Latin Vulgate. Other false teachings seemed to have been based on nothing but pure speculation or opinion, yet had been codified in canon law. And do you know what a few of the Reformers did with the church's canon law? They

burned it. It probably felt good to burn it. But that is not how the Reformation was born.

### **What Does it Mean to be "Protestant"?**

Contrary to popular belief, the word "Protestant" does not derive from the English word "protest." It derives from the Latin word, *protestari*, which means to publicly declare, testify, profess, or confess. In 1529 this word became associated with the movement of the 16<sup>th</sup> century known as the Reformation because the act of confessing the faith was so central to it. Christians in Europe began to confess the faith anew and write their confessions down. They invited others to do the same. This is how the Protestant Reformation was born.

Why did the Reformers put so much time and energy into writing confessions? What did they think they were doing? They did not write them because they wanted to start a new church. On the contrary, they insisted they were committed to the old one, the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church." When asked, "Where was the church before Luther?" it is said the early Protestants replied: "Where was your face before you washed it?"<sup>1</sup> Yet as difficult as it may be for us to imagine, the Reformers did not write confessions primarily because they wanted to reform the church.

The Reformers wrote confessions because they believed the truth of the gospel was at stake. It was not because they wanted a better, more informed, effective, efficient, organized, and disciplined church. Sure, they wanted the church to be all this and more. But the primary reason they wrote confessions was because as they studied the Bible they were awakened to the rich, manifold, and compelling truth of the gospel. More and more they realized that the gospel was being vigorously and persistently contested at various points and had been for years. So they were compelled to confess. Their reason for confessing was the same as the church fathers. They confessed not because they wanted to say more than what the Bible says, but because they did not want to say less.

This tells us something basic about what confessions are for. Their primary purpose is not *pedagogical* (to give people something they can remember). Nor is it *therapeutic* (to give people something to hold on to) neither is it *evangelistic* (to give people something they can share with outsiders) nor is it *legislative* or *regulatory* (to hold insiders accountable or in line). Confessions serve all these purposes and more. But to fail to understand their primary purpose, or to step over it quickly and move on to more pragmatic reasons, is to misunderstand their reason for being. It is to subvert their authority and drain the life-blood out of them.

No doubt pragmatic reasons became more prominent the more established Protestants became in Europe. The emphasis of 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers was to “confess their beliefs,” whereas the emphasis of 17<sup>th</sup> century Protestant scholastics was to “believe their confessions.” Both are necessary, of course. But where the latter took priority, the authority of confessions was gradually undermined and their power was lost.

The Reformers confessed their beliefs. Confronted by persistent unbelief, superstition, and heresy, they realized that if they did not they would betray not only the rich, manifold, and compelling truth of the gospel but the very honor and majesty of God. Confessing the faith was not first and foremost about protecting or preserving their little flocks. It was about the goodness and glory of the one true Shepherd whose voice they heard in the pages of the Bible. The result was a passionate outpouring and promulgation of a multitude of confessions that changed the world.

### **The Reformed Scripture Principle**

Yet one can detect from the start differences between the way the two great branches of the Reformation, the Lutherans and the Reformed, approached the business of writing confessions. The Lutherans wrote only seven confessions whereas the Reformed wrote nearly a hundred in the first one hundred years!<sup>2</sup> Luther and Melancthon wrote most of the Lutheran confessions whereas Reformed confessions were written by many authors over an extended (indeed, indefinite) period. This reflects a different understanding of their purpose.

The Lutherans decided in 1580 to put their seven confessions alongside the Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds into something called *The Book of Concord*. When they did, the Reformed expressed disappointment, if not indignation: “A book of *what?* Concord? It may look like *concord* to you, but not to us. We want concord with you, to be sure. But we need it with Scripture first. You folk think you’ve got it now, but there are passages you’re not paying enough attention to. Yet now you seem to think you’ve got the truth of the gospel in your pocket, all wrapped up tidy in your little *Book of Concord*, as if the work of biblical interpretation was now done, as if the task of critical reflection was now finished, as if the call to be reformed continually by the Word of God was now over, as if the voice of the Holy Spirit was now silent! But now that you’ve got it nailed down so well, how did ‘it,’ the truth of the gospel, become so tame, so manageable for you?”

Surely in my effort to channel our Reformed ancestors I exaggerate here, but not much.<sup>3</sup> When the Lutherans effectively closed their canon of conviction, the Reformed reacted against something they saw as dangerous, namely, a tendency among Lutherans to

absolutize their confessions as timeless expressions of Biblical truth, and treat them as if they had final, absolute, and unconditionally binding authority.<sup>4</sup> More serious is what it implied about the freedom and inexhaustible riches of God’s Word and our ability to interpret it so finally and definitively. The Reformed were not as confident about our ability to do so.

They were committed to the “Reformed Scripture Principle,” the conviction that nothing can compete with the final, absolute, binding authority of Scripture, the belief that no standard, competing insight, or interpretation can rival or stand alongside the Word of God, that nothing has the same rank, dignity, validity, or authority. The Reformed saw their confessions, therefore, as always human, partial, and provisional, and as such only relatively binding as compared to the absolute binding authority of Holy Scripture. They were careful not to usurp Scripture’s authority or bind consciences to anything that might serve as a substitute or even close second to it. And if you have any doubts about this, read Calvin’s *Institutes*, Book IV, Ch. 9 on “Councils and Their Authority.”

### **Subordinate Standards Are Still Standards**

Before concluding that Calvin was wrong or that all such qualifications are simply relativistic equivocations that vitiated the authority of confessions from the start, make no mistake: the Reformed saw their confessions as binding too. Because they saw them as human, partial, and provisional does not mean they are not authoritative. They may be only relatively binding, but they *are* binding. They may be only subordinate standards, but they *are* standards. The fact that the average lifespan of Calvin’s students who served as pastors in France was only a year or so is a pretty good indication their confessional commitments were firm.

Confessions for the Reformed are commentaries, human interpretations of Scripture that are “merely provisional, improvable and replaceable offerings.”<sup>5</sup> A confession is thus authoritative only to the extent that it points us to an obligation imposed upon us by the truth of Scripture. But here is the thing: when it does, then despite its human limitations, it speaks in a way that is as authoritative, binding, and obligatory as the truth of Scripture itself. How can that happen? God can make it happen. God can strike a straight blow with a crooked stick. Most preachers know this happens and when it does it happens despite their humanity not because of it.

One might think believing that nothing should compete with the absolute binding authority of Scripture would have made the Reformed reticent to write confessions. But it actually freed them to write more. It also freed them to confess their faith about a wider range of matters they saw incumbent to the faith. From the start

they insisted confessions have to do with faith and life. Reformed confessions tend not to separate faith and practice, but stipulate specific ethical demands. For instance, two of the *Ten Theses of Berne* of 1528—one of our earliest confessions—have to do with marriage. It has been said that for the Reformed “the Confession is not table talk, the mere voicing of opinions, nor edification which imposes no obligation, the expression of nice religious sentiments.”<sup>6</sup> Reformed confessions tend to get into the weeds of everyday life.

What does all this say about confessing the faith in the Reformed tradition? It says at our best we have tried to acknowledge God’s claim upon our whole life, but we have also been sober about the limits of our judgments. It says we have tried to be open to a fresh new hearing of the Word of God. Sometimes this has made us bold. We have been quicker than most to write confessions. We have been less willing to avoid concrete decisions and obligations imposed on us by the Word of God. In refusing to separate faith and life, we have also not been silent in the political and social realm. Our critiques of society and culture have been sharper than most and we have been often vigilant in affirming truth and rejecting falsehood and injustice in public life.

What accounts for this vigilance and vitality in our confessional life? Historically, it has had to do with our engagement of Scripture. At our best we have studied the Bible seriously and have been open to a fresh new hearing of the Word of God. But before patting ourselves on the back, it must also be said that in being open to a fresh new hearing of the Word of God, we have sometimes listened to other spirits, to voices other than the Good Shepherd’s. Sometimes we have simply listened to our own voices or to voices that have more to do with the spirit of the times than the Holy Spirit. As a result, we have wrestled with at least three basic temptations over the last several centuries.

### **Sometimes Saying More is Saying Less**

The first temptation has been to say more than the Bible says for no good reason. Saying more is the risk of every confession, of course. But since silence can be a greater sin than speaking, our tradition has often taken this risk. Yet sometimes our attempts to confess have been premature. We have spoken before we had a clear, clarifying, or necessary word from the Lord. Sometimes we have been guilty of what Luther called “apple-tying.” Apple-tying means attaching one’s own statement of belief to a confession and then saying, “See here, this belief really grows out of Scripture or is a necessary commitment drawn from it.” But it does not really grow out of Scripture nor is it a necessary commitment drawn from it. Rather it is tied on only to make it look like it grows out of Scripture.

We have many examples of this in our history, such as when in seeking to defend Scripture’s authority the Helvetic Consensus Formula of 1675 claimed that the Masoretic texts of the Old Testament were inspired, including the vowel points, even though scholars had begun to demonstrate that the vowel points were not added until after the 8<sup>th</sup> century! Such overreaching proved disastrous, undermining both the church and its confessions.<sup>7</sup> Other self-inflicted wounds in our history show we have paid a price for saying more than Scripture says not because we have ignored the latest science, but because we have drawn conclusions too hastily from it, while ignoring the whole counsel of Scripture. In saying more we have not only said less, but we have gotten ourselves into real trouble. This, of course, has not always been immediately apparent.

Reformed confessions have focused in recent decades on what is popularly known as “social justice.” On the basis of God’s reconciling work in Jesus Christ, the Confession of 1967, for example, addresses the sins at root in “racial discrimination,” “enslaving poverty,” “anarchy in sexual relationships,” etc. Given our tradition’s commitment to acknowledging God’s claim upon our whole life and the depth and breadth of these sins in our culture as well as in our own churches, it is hard to see how we could remain silent in face of them.

Yet other confessions, declarations, or statements from Reformed theologians in recent years have addressed many complex social ills. Claiming to be ‘prophetic,’ many tend toward simple moralizing. Some condemn the political or cultural ideologies of others but not their own. Others focus on the sins of past generations (often long renounced) while ignoring what they saw as sin. The recent Sarasota Statement of the “NEXT Church,” for example, denounces bigotry, racism, nationalism, classism, ideology, hatred, brutality, etc., yet ignores the sexual anarchy that C-67 condemns, and says nothing about abortion, euthanasia, divorce, drug abuse, violent crime or other threats to society and the sanctity of life.<sup>8</sup>

Granted, the church has been too often silent when she should have spoken. But the church is not equipped or commissioned to speak about everything that is wrong in the world. Nor is the world likely to listen when the church behaves no differently (“I might believe in the Redeemer if his followers looked more redeemed,” Nietzsche said). Yet the church must continually weigh when to speak or remain silent, and face the temptation of saying more in order not to say less.

The Westminster divines knew about this temptation and said that councils “may err, and many have erred” and “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it

in matters of faith and worship.” Moreover, they said: “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.” On the one hand, they warn against speculation beyond Scripture, on the other hand, they talk about “good and necessary consequence deduced from Scripture.” The problem has been deciding the difference. One man’s speculation has been another’s “good and necessary consequence,” and vice versa.

Yet what about Westminster itself? Does it go beyond what can or should be necessarily deduced from Scripture? Presbyterians have debated this before the ink on it in 1647 was dry. Most have said that it does, in one way or another. Many have said that it says too much or too little about many things, which is why affirming its “system of doctrine” rather than strict subscriptionism was long regarded as sufficient for American Presbyterians. But Westminster says so much so well that the thought of anything better could hardly be imagined for another two centuries by most Presbyterians, and for good reason.

Having watched the Reformation flourish around them yet being stifled in England for 130 years, when English Presbyterians finally got the chance to write a confession they had learned a lot about how the faith was being misunderstood and contested, and were determined to set things straight and nail a lot down. The Westminster Confession, as John Leith writes, “states the faith with a perceptiveness of issues, a deftness of nuance, a clarity and precision of definition, a chasteness and economy of words that has seldom been equaled, much less surpassed. It combines in one coherent statement pure doctrine and ethics, theory and practice. In one sense it does the job too well, for its adherents begin to think of it as the final statement of the faith,” which suggests another temptation.<sup>9</sup>

### **Standing Firm Does Not Mean Standing Still**

Whether between the Old Side or New Side, the New School or Old School, nearly all the conflicts of American Presbyterians throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries had to do in one way or another with the adequacy of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Some, like the Cumberland Presbyterians, started new denominations because of it. Others, especially in New England, claimed they left the Church or the faith entirely because of it. But the fact that it served to hold so many different people together for so long through so many trials and tribulations is testimony to its remarkable strength. Probably no document had a greater influence on the founding of America.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, voices calling for its revision, if not replacement, were raised before the Civil War, increased after the reunion of the New and Old Schools in the northern Presbyterian Church in 1869, grew louder in the 1880s, and reached a crescendo in 1889.

The main concerns were over its doctrine of double predestination, its labeling of the Pope as Antichrist, its reference to dying “elect infants” being saved and silence about the rest, its refusal to affirm God’s love for all, its insufficient attention to the Holy Spirit and silence about the Church’s mission to the world. Old Princeton stalwarts, such as B.B. Warfield, vigorously opposed confessional revision not because they were insensitive to these concerns but because of the precedent they feared it would set and the danger that it would undermine the confession’s integrity.

Fearing such debates might filter down to the southern Presbyterian Church, the aged arch-defender of the South’s “peculiar institution,” Robert Louis Dabney defended the Confession of Faith in 1897 on the grounds that it “relies upon Holy Scripture, not upon metaphysics, to support its positions. Nor does it borrow for the moulding of its system the shame of any human school of theology. ... the structure which is built exclusively upon this is, like it, permanent.” Therefore, “It is for this reason that the Confession will need no amendment until the Bible needs to be amended.”<sup>11</sup>

Is it not fair to suggest that something basic about the Reformed tradition has been lost here? Is it not fair to say that our sinfulness and the limits of our ability to interpret God’s Word properly and fully have not been accounted for here? More importantly, have not the inexhaustible riches and freedom of God’s Word been forgotten here, as if the Holy Spirit had nothing more to teach us from Scripture and we had nothing more to learn, at least of any real or “necessary consequence”?

Whereas the first temptation is to say more than Scripture says because one fears it really does not say enough, the second temptation is to say that Scripture says enough but goes ahead and says more anyway; and having said more it is confident that one has said all there is to say. Whereas the first stems from an inordinate restlessness and a lack of confidence in the ability of God’s Word to make itself clear to us in time, the second from an inordinate peace and self-confidence in our ability to interpret Scripture once and for all times. Both stem from pride and impatience, from a lack of attentiveness to and curiosity about God’s Word.

The debate over confessional revision dominated the northern Church throughout the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Advocates of revision such as George Stewart, President of Auburn Seminary, said the Westminster

Confession did not represent the faith of the Church today and “We are not taken seriously when we affirm that it does.”<sup>12</sup> When the final vote was taken in 1902, it passed overwhelmingly. Chapters on “The Holy Spirit” and “The Love of God and Missions” were added and other revisions made. While it was a major defeat to opponents of revision, some knew it could have been much worse as there was more than one powerful force in the Church at the time driving it.

Old Princeton stalwart, Francis Patton, argued in 1889 that confessional revision was being driven not only by liberals, but by “Comprehensionists who are ready in the interests of Catholicity to see the Confession superseded by a shorter creed, or its doctrinal area greatly contracted.” Announcing that “denominationalism” had come to an end (Does this sound familiar?), they were asking, “May it not be that we have outgrown the era of Confessionalism? May it not be that a shorter creed written under the inspiration of the synthetic and irenic conditions of today would be better suited to the practical demands of our aggressive Church?” Here a third temptation in our tradition is suggested.

### Essential Tenets Are Not Enough

Who were these “Comprehensionists”? What did they want? Why did it pose such a threat in Patton’s view? They were the Evangelicals who, having assumed that “denominations have outlived their usefulness,” sought to adopt for the sake of *unity*, *authenticity*, and *utility* a short statement of faith or list of essential tenets, that would “strike out everything but what is common to evangelical Christians” and, thus, appeal to more people. Patton warned: “It is the demand for Christian unity; it is the anti-confessional drift; it is the growing spirit of comprehension that is giving momentum to the movement” of “revolution” that now risks “throwing the Confession overboard altogether.”

Was Patton overreacting here or was this a real threat? “The Comprehensionist party,” with their “minimizing tendency,” he said, “suppose that by timely concessions in unessential points they can satisfy the craving for change,” but they are mistaken. Patton did not deny: “the Confession could be improved. Some of the space now given to the Pope might very well be devoted to that modern compound of Hegel and Schleiermacher known as the doctrine of the Christian consciousness.” He admitted: “We are living through a period of theological unrest; but there is ... no dogmatic crisis upon us that calls for the reconstruction of theology and new definition.” Patton could not imagine the upheaval about to take place over the next quarter century between the Portland Deliverance of 1892 and Auburn Affirmation of 1924. But he knew no mere statement of fundamentals would overcome it. Perhaps affirming openly contested beliefs might be helpful in an

emergency situation, but not as a serious long-term solution. Against the rising tide of unbelief, a Church willing to affirm only a brief, attenuated statement of faith could not survive. “Can such a Church,” he asked, “prove a breakwater to the floods of infidelity?”<sup>13</sup>

The temptation Patton was seeking to address has been around a long time. American Evangelicals within mainstream theological traditions have been especially susceptible to it. In order to bring more people into the church and fulfill other pragmatic ends, Evangelicals have often adopted shorter, simpler statements of faith. Within mainstream traditions they have often done so in the name of unity and by embracing a generic Pan-Protestant vision. Patton’s plea to them was: This is not enough. To paraphrase, his plea was: Don’t lose your deep-rooted theological identity. Don’t abandon your rich confessional heritage. Don’t neglect your theological inheritance. Don’t exchange your birthright of coherent, systematic thinking or system of doctrine, for a mess (or *soup du jour*) of evangelical essentials. There is a war on. Affirming essential tenets is not enough. That’s like taking a pocketknife to a gunfight. Sooner or later you will lose and it will be ugly.

Naming essential tenets may be necessary, but they are not a sufficient safeguard against the many threats and counter forces within and without the church today. They do not provide pastors or sessions enough theological warrant or authority to defend against the thousands of false ideas and practices that come up in most congregations on a routine basis in America today. There is simply too much that can go wrong in the church to leave pastors and sessions so defenseless. Too much has already gone wrong in the church for us to neglect the wisdom and witness of those who have gone before us. Likewise, guiding principles, core values, affinity groups, and best practices may be helpful, but they do not have the power or authority to guide leaders through the most stubborn realities of congregational life or the deepest levels of conflict.

Patton predicted weakening confessional authority in the church would leave a vacuum that would be filled by a stronger emphasis on “polity or the sacraments.” What he did not predict and could not have imagined was the extent to which this vacuum would be filled by personality and the rise of personality-driven ministries throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, even under formal confessional authority, personality-driven ministries can easily go rogue, but without it they often reign unchecked and go completely off the rails.

Pastors, sessions, and congregations need to be bound together by greater, deeper, firmer, more time-tested bonds of fellowship than brief statements of faith provide. Essential tenets are too thin. We need a thicker

description, a deeper, fuller understanding of the gospel and the Christian life. We need confessions. Essential tenets state conclusions whereas confessions tend to say more about how we make them. Essential tenets state points of origin and destination, whereas confessions tend to speak also about the journey and include vital information about the road. Essential tenets are like signposts whereas confessions are more like maps. Sometimes there is no substitute for having a map. Even an old and imperfect one can be better than many clear, bright, freshly painted, accurate signs.

The problem with naming essential tenets is that it can imply all other beliefs may not be. And the church never knows what may turn out to be essential. Who knew fifty years ago what would be contested today? Who knows what will be contested tomorrow? Luther said: “What right, then, have we to make little of doctrine? No matter how nonessential a point of doctrine may seem, if slighted it may prove the gradual disintegration of the truths of our salvation.”<sup>14</sup>

So having described the temptations of reprimating conservatism, liberal progressivism, and evangelical pragmatism, is there a way beyond them? Is there a way beyond the Puritan re-enactors of our day who pretend as if the questions raised in the 17<sup>th</sup> century were the final questions—despite all evidence to the contrary—and who talk at times as if the Bible is a pretty good commentary on the Westminster Confession? Is there a way beyond the pious platitudes of the progressives, the ecclesial Trotskyites, who think “always being reformed” means “the revolution never ends”? Is there a way beyond evangelical entrepreneurs who, so focused on sucking people in the front door of the church, seem so clueless as to why so many are blown out the back door so unchanged, why singing “Just as I Am,” they came as they were, and left as they came?

### **Misunderstanding “Mere Christianity”**

There may be no way around these temptations, but there is a way through them. In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis expressed concern that readers might “suppose that ‘mere’ Christianity is put forward as an alternative to the creeds of the existing communions—as if a man could adopt it in preference to Congregationalism or Greek Orthodoxy or anything else.” He explained ‘mere’ Christianity “is more like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms.” Lewis said it was his desire to bring readers “into that hall.” “But it is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals. The hall is a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in.”

Lewis’s analogy is not perfect, but it does address the false idea that one can live the Christian life for long in an abstract, general way rather than in a concrete,

particular way. Sooner or later faithfulness will demand that concrete decisions be made and a specific room be chosen, Lewis believed. Yet he warns “one of the rules common to the whole house” is: “When you have reached your own room, be kind to those who have chosen different doors and to those who are still in the hall. If they are wrong they need your prayers all the more; and if they are your enemies, then you are under orders to pray for them.” Lewis understood the dangers of doctrinaire confessionalism as well.

But how do we avoid the dangers of cool doctrinal indifferentism on one hand and supercilious doctrinaire confessionalism on the other, between vague, loose creedless Christianity on one side and nit-picking, gnat-straining doctrinal precisionism on the other? Or, to follow Lewis’s analogy, how do we know if we are spending too much time in the hall or in our rooms? How deep can conversations go in a hall, anyway? And who says Christians living in different rooms ought not to sit down and eat together? This is not what the Bible says and is surely where Lewis’s analogy breaks down, as I suspect Lewis knew. Still, the question persists: How do we maintain our particular, concrete confessional identity without compromising our commitment to the church’s catholicity?

I think this is one of the great challenges the Reformed-Presbyterian family faces today, especially in America and not least for many readers of this journal. It is not an easy challenge. Nor are we the only theological tradition facing it. However, I think one step toward meeting it is to recognize that it is not a new challenge for us. American Presbyterians have been wrestling with it since the Civil War. Patton and Old Princeton were wrestling with it at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

By then, however, “Old School Presbyterians” with their concerns about doctrinal integrity were on the ropes whereas “New School Presbyterians” with their concerns about missions, evangelism, social reform, and ecumenism were on the rise in power and influence. Yet there were still many Presbyterians in America in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century wary of the Pan-Protestant vision. Many wanted to be truly ecumenical but also genuinely Reformed. It turns out, there were Reformed folk around the world who wanted the same thing.

### **On Being Reformed and Ecumenical**

After his break with liberalism and at the beginning of his theological revolution, Karl Barth reclaimed his Reformed heritage and studied Reformed confessions as carefully as anyone in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup> He never shared the vague and illusory Pan-Protestant vision of Liberals or most Evangelicals. And though he was one of the severest critics of the ecumenical movement, he probably contributed to it more than any other 20<sup>th</sup>

century theologian. Barth did not think there was any contradiction in being genuinely Reformed and truly ecumenical. Nor did he think loyalty to the one true church and one's own particular confessional tradition was a matter of balance or finding a "middle way," as a good Anglican might think, as if we had access to some standpoint from above or outside where we could assess how close we may or may not be to it.

For Barth the way to true ecumenicity begins not by doubting or criticizing one's confessional tradition, but by honoring it, as one honors one's father and mother, according to the Fifth Commandment. It begins by trusting that the same Spirit who spoke to the prophets and apostles spoke through them to our forebears in their particular time and place, and that our forebears listened and responded obediently as best they could. It begins by taking their witness seriously and trusting that the same Spirit who spoke to them can speak to us in our particular time and place and that we should, therefore, take them and ourselves seriously as responsible hearers of God's Word.

Being ecumenical for Barth begins not by dialing back our confessional convictions but by owning them. It begins by trusting that the misunderstandings, dangers, threats, and temptations to the faith that our fathers and mothers faced were real and still are, and that their responses to them are still, until better instructed, valid for us, and not only for us but for all Christians. Until better instructed, we sincerely receive and adopt their confessions as our own, trusting that the Holy Spirit led them to say, concretely at specific points, "Here we stand, we can do no other," and we humbly offer these confessions to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. This is the first step in being truly ecumenical.

Barth warned that they are in "flight" from the unity of the church who "try to bring unity nearer by ceasing to take themselves seriously [as hearers of God's Word], by letting slip the special responsibility which they have, by denying and renouncing their special character for the sake of internal or external peace, by trying to exist in a kind of nondescript Christianity. The way to a self-chosen supra-confessionalism is not by a long shot the way to the unity of the Church, but the way to a new separation, the particular feature of which will be its featurelessness as a Church."<sup>16</sup>

Of course, there are always great risks. At a meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1925, when many were clamoring for a new Pan-Protestant creed, Barth elaborated some of these risks. In an address even J.G. Machen commended, Barth insisted: "The 'particular company' must itself become the 'ecumenical company' before it can agree honestly in an ecumenical creed." The way to true ecumenicity, in

other words, is by taking the scandal of particularity seriously: not only God's, but our own. It is by confessing with our forebears in our own particular time and place, "Here we stand, we can do no other" that Christians find each other in the one true church. Yet Barth adds: "We must have *found* one another mutually, not just in a sentimental brotherly love but in the *criminality* common to them and to us, and in the pardon for criminals common to them and to us—exactly as pardoned criminals recognize one another."<sup>17</sup>

Here is the point: Anyone who is proud of being a Presbyterian (especially anyone who is proud of having chosen to be) does not know or has forgotten, literally, the first thing about being one. Being a Presbyterian is not about growing up in or joining some exclusive club. It is about being caught in the criminality of concrete confessional commitments. It is about being moved to confess the truth openly in all its scandalous particularity. It is about standing up and confessing with others, "Yes, we are guilty. We dare to say more than Scripture says here but only because we do not dare to say less. Here we stand, we can do no other."

"But why can you 'do no other'?" some might ask. Because true confessions of faith are made not because we want to or think we should, but only because we must.<sup>18</sup> We do not make them on the basis of whether they will have an effect or because we wish to reform the church. True confession is made without regard to consequences or results, but because God's glory and honor are at stake and the truth of the gospel has been made so manifest by the Holy Spirit that if we do not "the very stones themselves will cry out."

True confessions of faith are not made in order to make 'statements' about this or that issue that arises in the church or world. The church is not really authorized to make statements about anything. Rather the church is commanded to confess. Making a statement of faith may appear more humble than making a confession of faith (and probably implies that we do not mean it as much), but often enough it betrays a false humility and an unwillingness to take ourselves and our forebears seriously as fully responsible hearers of God's Word.

So although we may have no warrant for being proud of being Presbyterian, we do have important reasons for taking our tradition seriously. Its understanding of the covenant, Christology, faith, freedom, providence, the relationship of justification and sanctification, worship, the church, the sacraments, the Christian life, and many other doctrines, have served to enrich and strengthen the church's witness. "You do not have to be Reformed and Presbyterian to be a Christian," as John Leith said, "but the one, holy, apostolic, catholic church would be greatly impoverished, as well as our public life without



this tradition.” “No one tradition exhausts the meaning of Christian faith, and every tradition has its share of false starts, mistaken judgments, and betrayals of its own best convictions. The Reformed tradition has been one of the authentic and powerful ways in which Christian people have lived out their faith.”<sup>19</sup>

Confessing the faith, however, is not about celebrating our heritage or highlighting our distinctiveness. It is not about our preferences or likes. Nor is it about safety or gatekeeping. The primary purpose of a confession is not defensive. By taking our tradition seriously there is always a risk of becoming tribalistic. But confessing the faith is not primarily about our identity. It is about the God who has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ.

Much can be learned in open and honest ecumenical dialogue and, historically, the Reformed have often played a leading role in it. But open and honest means not dialing back or doubling down on our commitments, but rather simply laying our cards on the table face up. Of course, there are many matters of indifference about which Christians of good character and in good faith can and will disagree. But, as Barth said, “Where the question of truth is sacrificed to that of love and peace, we are not on the way to the one Church.”<sup>20</sup>

To be sure, we have a responsibility to revise, amend, or replace our confessions of faith if they are incorrect, insufficient, or unfaithful according to Scripture. There are formal criteria for doing so. Suffice it to say: There are reasons we have a Second Helvetic Confession and not simply a First. There are reasons some confessions still speak and others have been set aside. But before we remove fence posts we ought to find out for sure why they were put there. We may discover we are not as removed from the dangers, temptations, or conflicts of our forebears as we thought or as clear about the gospel and we need now as much as ever to sincerely receive and adopt the confessions they wrote as our own.

### For Those Who Want It Simple

I suspect few having read this far need to be convinced that they need confessions of faith. But I know many who remain unconvinced. They ask: “Why can’t we just keep everything simple? Why can’t we just have the Bible?” Here is my answer: “You can. So long as you don’t ask too many questions about the Bible, so long as you are not really interested in talking with people who do, you can. So long as you are content to be in a church where everyone claims merely to register his or her opinion, so long as you never feel forced to make concrete decisions after praying or reading the Bible or want to learn from others who have, you can. So long as you are not concerned that you might misunderstand what the Bible says or need not learn from others who have been, you can. So long as you think your church

has never gone wrong and you believe everything that comes out of the mouths of preachers or other leaders, you can. But this is not the type of people we have been. Yet, tell me, where do you think we would be today, where would the church be today, if Martin Luther and his friends had not confessed their faith 500 years ago?

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<sup>1</sup> John H. Leith, *The Church: A Believing Fellowship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1981), 38.

<sup>2</sup> See James T. Dennison, *Reformed Confessions of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries in English Translation*, I–IV (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008–2014).

<sup>3</sup> Robert D. Linder, “The French Calvinist Response to the Formula of Concord,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 19:1 (Winter) 1982, 18–37.

<sup>4</sup> “The Lutherans tended to absolutize their Confessions as timeless expressions of Biblical truth, whereas the Reformed Church looks upon its Confessions as historically conditioned and valid only until such time as they should be superseded by a newer and perhaps better Confession” Arthur Cochrane, *The Church’s Confession Under Hitler* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 171.

<sup>5</sup> Reformed confessions “were fundamentally intended as merely provisional, improvable and replaceable offerings, never as an authority, as the ‘form and rule’ that the Formula of Concord found in the Augsburg Confession” Karl Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, trans. Darrell L. Guder and Judith J. Guder (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 24.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*, trans. J.L.M. Haire and Ian Henderson (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1939), 182.

<sup>7</sup> “By 1725 all of the Swiss cities except Berne and Zurich had set it aside. The great confessional period of the Reformed churches was at an end” Richard Muller, “Reformed Confessions and Catechisms” in *Dictionary of Historical Theology*, ed. Trevor Hart (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 484f.

<sup>8</sup> <http://nextchurch.net/new-statement-faith/>.

<sup>9</sup> John H. Leith, *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1973), 111.

<sup>10</sup> James C. Goodloe, “The Influence of the Westminster Confession of Faith on American Culture” in *Calvin Studies VIII*, ed. John H. Leith, Davidson, NC, 43–57.

<sup>11</sup> Robert L. Dabney, “The Doctrinal Contents of the Confession” in *Memorial Volume of the Westminster Assembly 1647–1897*, ed. Francis Beattie (Richmond: The Presbyterian Committee on Publication, 1897), 94–95.

<sup>12</sup> George Stewart, “Entirely New Standards Are Demanded At The Present Time: Why There Should Be A New Creed: What Should Be Its Form” in *The Creed Revision* (New York: Presbyterian Union, 1901), 6–10.

<sup>13</sup> Francis Patton, “The Revision of The Confession of Faith,” *Independent*, Dec. 5, 1889, 14–16.

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<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, trans. Theodore Graebner (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 114.

<sup>15</sup> See above *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1:678.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Barth, "The Desirability and Possibility of a Universal Reformed Creed" in *Theology and Church*, trans. L.P. Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 125;

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J.G. Machen, "Karl Barth and 'The Theology of Crisis'" in *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. D.G. Hart (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 539.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2:624.

<sup>19</sup> John H. Leith, *Fund for the Explication and Application of Reformed Theology; An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, revised edition (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 7.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1:680–1.

# A Reforming Recommendation

by Tee Gatewood

The year 2017 is the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Half a millennium has passed since Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of All Saint's Church in Wittenberg. During this year there is much to celebrate joyfully and ponder critically. This tension is perhaps best captured by Jaroslav Pelikan's phrase, "the tragic necessity of the Reformation."<sup>1</sup>

The Reformation resulted in the tragic division of the Western church. We need to ponder this critically and see the way in which we are called to unity while trying to live faithfully in a fragmented church.<sup>2</sup> At the same time the Reformation was necessary. It was a movement of God among his people to reform the church according to the Word of God. We need to celebrate this, humbly seeking to receive from and imitate a long line of faithful witnesses within the Reforming tradition.

There are various ways we can study the Reformation as we try to hold these two things together. We can focus on the interpretation of Scripture and the development of doctrine. Or we can approach it historically, focusing on the people and personalities as well as economic and social factors that shaped and encouraged the Reformation. A more immediate way is to learn from the practice that defined and drove the Reformation: preaching. To that end, I want to pass on a particular reforming recommendation as a way we can celebrate and learn more from the Reformation.

## Preaching in the Reformation

"The true treasure of the church," according to Luther's 62nd thesis, "is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God." When Reforming pastors and priests discovered this treasure they simultaneously heard the call to share that treasure with their people through preaching. This emphasis on the hearing and speaking of the gospel fueled the Reformation and is

captured by the declaration of the Second Helvetic Confession that "the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God."

This declaration stands in contrast to the prior practice of the church that elevated the sacraments and diminished the importance of preaching in worship. Before the Reformation, preaching was often done in town squares, along the road, and in the fields. Preaching was the special calling of certain priests and monks or a special task for parish priests or bishops on certain feast days. But with Luther and Calvin and Zwingli the sermon returned to gathered worship. It soon became the center point of worship; pulpits were raised literally and metaphorically to new heights.

The Reformers' passion to share the treasure of the grace of God through preaching infuses their writings. This animating passion also led to the very specific charge to teach the basic truths of the gospel and Scripture.<sup>3</sup> In his preface to the Larger Catechism, Luther includes a passionate exhortation to preachers to study the catechism as the epitome of Scripture so that they might teach the same. According to Luther, too many preachers were negligent and distracted. They were proud or ignorant, and so were their people. The remedy was to be found in becoming like a child who is willing "to keep on reading, teaching, learning, pondering, and meditating, and do not cease until they have made a test and are sure that they have taught the devil to death, and have become more learned than God Himself and all His saints."

Part of what must be learned and taught, according to Luther and Calvin, is the Ten Commandments. This is why the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and Apostle's Creed appear again and again in catechisms of the Reforming churches. The most basic things turn out to be the deepest. Touching on this Luther wrote,

“anyone who knows the Ten Commandments perfectly knows the entire scripture.”<sup>4</sup>

This might come as a surprise to many of us who associate Luther with a strong division between the law and the gospel. But for Luther what must be distinguished to understand the gospel should never be divided. As Jaroslav Pelikan concludes, “The distinction between law and gospel was not a matter of biblical location or of chronology, but of ‘rightly dividing the word of truth.’”<sup>5</sup> In this, Luther took his own medicine; he preached, taught, and wrote on the Ten Commandments throughout his life.

### Preaching the Ten Words

After reading Luther’s exhortation, I preached on the Ten Commandments to begin Epiphany. I took the exhortation of Luther and the example of Calvin to heart.<sup>6</sup> My congregation was not initially excited. However, we soon discovered what Luther claimed, namely, that to rightly understand the commandments we had to search the entirety of Scripture seeking to understand them in light of Christ. In what follows, I want to note several things we learned.

First, reading and teaching and preaching the commandments drove my congregation and me back to Scripture. In this we were unknowingly following the pattern of the Reformers for whom preaching was a return to the sources. In this return we can learn that Scripture interprets Scripture. This can happen as we read the Ten Commandments within the story of the Lord God and his people. The prologue of the Commandments should make this initial insight obvious. The Lord God who will give the commands is the one who first saves his people.

While many ‘replicas’ of the Decalogue start with “Thou Shalt Not,” the commands as we find them in Scripture are given by the one who first identifies and describes himself as their God, as the one who has brought them up out of Egypt. This God has a proper name revealed to Moses in the bush that burns but is not consumed. This God reminds them of the *ordo salutis* before giving the commands,

*“You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Exodus 19:4–6)*

As with Paul, the indicative precedes the imperative. The Lord God saves his people and then commands them. Grace precedes command. God acts and his

people are set free to respond. In more abstract moments Luther often reversed this sequence. He spoke of Law and Gospel or Law then Gospel. However, here we see with Luther that it is the Gospel that precedes or contains the Law.

God, according to Luther, is the one from whom we receive and to whom we return. Echoing Jesus on a different mountain, Luther asserts that such faith and authentic trust settles on the only true God and trust in him alone.<sup>7</sup> Such trust is a work of the heart. It is the first work done in faith that leads to worship and away from idolatry. In this way of being justified by faith and sanctified by faith we discover obedience to the First Commandment by being responsive to the saving action of God. If we take the Ten Commandments out of context and miss the initiating grace of God then we misread the commands and obscure the gift of obedience entirely.

Second, preaching the Ten Commandments forces us to read backwards and forwards with the grand narrative of redemption. To preach the Commandments as more than mere rules we have to push forward to Christ while looking backward to creation. When Jesus, like Moses before him, goes up the mountain he tells us that he has not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Risen from the dead he also claimed that every scripture speaks of him. Preaching the Ten Commandments we discover this not only in theory but also in practice. Every command whispers his name and shows us how God’s work of salvation is connected to the work of creation.

For example, preaching on the Third Commandment we are forced to recognize the way we use and abuse the name of the Lord. In humility we are led to Christ. In him we find the one who teaches us to speak rightly to the Lord as his God and Father. As a result we learn to speak to God in prayer and to others as his witnesses. Because this is a movement of grace we can at the same time recognize and acknowledge and confess that we continue to misuse the name of the Lord. The result is that God’s name is blasphemed among the pagans because of the people of God (Romans 2). As we notice this pattern of fulfillment and salvation and ongoing conviction, the Commandments lead us to the Word that is the Alpha and the Omega of all God’s words.

So too the Commandments lead us back to Scripture. For example, the Sabbath commandment is grounded in the story and logic of creation. Going forwards and then backwards we can grasp that this Commandment calls us back into right relation with the God who creates and creates space for us to delight in creation with its Creator. In a parallel fashion, the

Commandment to avoid adultery forces us to go back to the creation story. Here the creation story reminds us that we are created together in the image of God and given each other to rule and receive as we relate to each other. This relational reality is given in creation, commanded by Moses, and fulfilled in Christ. Obeying these we enter into the deepest mysteries of marriage.

Third, preaching and hearing the Commandments force us to confront our hearts' desire and God's deep desire. Do we love God with all our heart and mind and soul? If we do, then do we seek to obey his Commandments? Do our passions lead us on the narrow way and into the Lord's promise of blessing children to the 1000th generation? The only other option, according to the Second Commandment, is to hate God and disobey. If we follow this path, we place ourselves in the path of this jealous God who punishes the children to the third or fourth generation.

As I preached this Commandment I was tempted to explain this language away. But instead I found in these words the gospel of a God who loves completely and calls us to come to him in complete love and obedience and trust. This is not the distant and dispassionate God of the philosophers, but the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob who calls us to enter into the joy and delight of the Triune life. This is a God who calls us to live in faith even while we recognize that there are real consequences to our disobedience. This is the God we are free to love and free to fear. As Stanley Hauerwas says, this is the God who cares about what his people do with their pots and pans as well as with their words and genitals. This God has created all things and created them to be received in gratitude and used in faith. Nothing less is worthy of his name and his people. In this way, the Ten Commandments challenge the way we try to keep the living Lord on the surface of our lives. So too they are a challenge to superficial preaching.

Finally, preaching the Ten Commandments reminds us that we are called to be united to Christ and distinguished from the world. People who follow the Ten Commandments do not follow their own desires. They do not follow their own way. They are a counter cultural community. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon never tire of pointing this out. They write, "The Commandments are not guidelines for humanity in general. They are a countercultural way of life for those who know whose they are. Their function is ... to produce a people who are, in our daily lives, a sign, a signal, a witness that God has not left the world to its own devices."<sup>8</sup> They go so far as to want to put this label on the Decalogue: "*Don't try to obey any of these commandments alone.*"<sup>9</sup>

To preach on these countercultural words is to call a people to a new life. Here the people and the newness are important. We are called to turn from our old lives controlled by sin. In Christ we are new creations. Moreover, we are called to be made new with others who call on the name of the Lord and depend on the empowering presence of the Spirit. In other words, preaching on the Decalogue forces us to fight our individualism and confess our pride and turn from our lust for autonomy.

### **A Relevant Recommendation**

Autonomy literally means being a law unto ourselves. Our contemporary culture is obsessed with autonomy. We assert and defend the right to identify ourselves, name ourselves, and change ourselves at will. In this way we are driven deeper and deeper into ourselves.

The Ten Commandments come at this 'curving in' on ourselves in a way that is direct and devastating. The Lord who commands is the one who gives life and salvation and calls his people to himself to give them to the world. The two stories with their different trajectories could not be more different. Noting this we can see the relevance of the Ten Commandments and our need to hear them and preach them till we preach the devil to death. I have not gotten there yet. However, the Reformers' recommendation is a great place to start.

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<sup>1</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism*. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1959), 45.

<sup>2</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *The End of Protestantism* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016) is helpful in keeping the tension both theologically and practically.

<sup>3</sup> For a brief introduction to the importance of catechetical preaching, see Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of Scripture in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 16–19.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, trans. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 4–5.

<sup>5</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma, 1300-1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984), 168.

<sup>6</sup> See *Calvin's Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, trans. Benjamin Farley (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *The Truth about God*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 18.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 (italics in original).

# Exile and New Life

by J. Andrew Dearman

The topic of exile and new life intersect with several pertinent matters today. The Assyrian and Babylonian exiles (or as some historians now describe it, “forced migrations”) are the primary example of corporate failure in the Old Testament. These events, moreover, play a major role in the shaping of the Old Testament canon. One of our most influential biblical theologians, N.T. Wright, has proposed that a continuing sense of exile in the post-exilic period among Jews is the matrix in which Jesus announced the advent of the anticipated Kingdom of God.

The concept of exile, therefore, has considerable sway in contemporary biblical interpretation. Many of us are interested in and disturbed by systemic failure in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Any insight we can gain from Scripture on defining and dealing with failure will be welcomed. Some of our contemporaries have suggested that the Babylonian exile is particularly worthy of study as a way to think about the broader phenomenon of post-Christendom and minority status in western societies. One American Christian has said recently, “Let’s stop the pity party and instead say, ‘We’re in exile and this is not the first time God’s people have been in exile.’”<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, I want first to give a survey of the impact of exile on the three largest prophetic books. Secondly, I want to look at Deuteronomy and its presentation of exile. And thirdly, I want to offer a few comments on the book of Lamentations and how it deals with identity and memory.

## Major Prophets

While there are multiple historical factors at work in bringing Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel to completion as books, no other factor is as influential as the defeat of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. Each of the three Major Prophets is decisively shaped by its critique of God’s people for corporate failure and its projection of God’s transforming initiatives in a future beyond the judgment of exile. Major paradigms of not just Old Testament theology but of biblical theology are built around the prophetic portrayal of exile and its aftermath. In sketching the following paradigms, it is their cumulative effect that is important, not the comprehensiveness of the sketch.

*Covenant broken by Israel. Covenant renewed by God: Jer. 31:31–34.* This dynamic is common to the Major Prophets, even as the terminology of covenant renewal varies among them. The term, new covenant, actually occurs only once in the entire Old Testament, namely in Jer. 31 (See Isa. 59:21 and Ezek. 37:26). Yet, as providence would have it, the terms old and new covenant became decisive for the shape of the entire Christian Bible. The end of political rule for the Davidic Dynasty in Jerusalem and a new David is anticipated. The Babylonians brought some four hundred years of Davidic rule in Jerusalem to a political end.

*Jer. 52:31–34:* The book of Jeremiah concludes with a report (52:31–34; 2 Kings 25:27–30), indicating that after 37 years of imprisonment in Babylon, Jehoiachin had been released and was treated well “all the days of his life.” 2 Kings ends its presentation of Israel’s history with this same passage. Jehoiachin and his descendants are the family of continuity in tracing the Davidic line into the post-exilic period, hence the ending of Jeremiah, and the recognition that his grandson Zerubbabel, the Jewish governor of Jerusalem in the Persian period, was a descendant of David. Prophecies of a new David or the rise of a descendant of David are also common to the Major Prophets and are obviously influential in the post-exilic period (Jer. 33:15–17; Ezek. 37:24–25). Jesus as the messianic Son of David is a core confession in the New Testament. I cite only one New Testament reference: Matt 1:1–17. Note how the exile influences Matthew’s portrayal of history. In a quite remarkable statement, Raymond Brown proposed: “Ulrich Zwingli maintained that if one understood the genealogy correctly, it contained the essential theology of the Reformation. I would be bolder: It contains the essential theology of the Old and New Testaments.”<sup>2</sup>

*Jerusalem destroyed and Jerusalem rebuilt.* Each of the Major Prophets portrays Jerusalem’s demise and her children in exile. A physical rebuilding and return of inhabitants to Jerusalem are parts of their historical horizon as well (Isa. 54:5–8). But this brief description is woefully inadequate to describe the rich engagement of the prophets with the elect city and her fortunes. As God’s chosen vessel, she was daughter, wife, mother, and queen. In her failure and demise, she was prostitute, adulteress, orphan, and divorcee. In the post-exilic restoration, she was rebuilt and repopulated under Persian auspices. In an eschatological transformation to come, everything is made new. The New Testament

adoption of this theme is also rich (Heb. 12:22–24). As Derek Kidner says succinctly, “What Jerusalem was to the Israelite, the church is to the Christian.”<sup>3</sup> We shall return briefly to Jerusalem, but first a related word about the temple, the heart of Jerusalem.

*First Temple, Second Temple, New/Eschatological Temple of God:* The Babylonians destroyed the first temple in Jerusalem, bringing nearly 400 years of worship at that sanctuary to an end. Each of the Major Prophets assumes a rebuilt temple at the end of exile, a structure essentially completed by the year 516. As with the portrayal of Jerusalem, this brief description is woefully inadequate to the eschatological visions of the Major Prophets, particularly Ezekiel.

In terms of spatial transformation, Isaiah offers the largest paradigm of all the prophets, namely, that of a new heavens and a new earth, with a transformed, expanded Jerusalem at the center (Isaiah 65:17–25). A physical return from exile—restoration of life in Judah and Jerusalem—demonstrated God’s resolve to heal his people’s self-incurred wound, but it was not the ultimate fulfillment of the prophet’s grand vision. Exile had put God’s people among the nations. This was opportunity and new beginnings, not simply judgment and tragedy. And the nations would be drawn to God’s kingdom, coming to Jerusalem to receive divine instruction or judgment and ultimately to live in a restored creation, where death and predator relations were altered.

Ezekiel’s stunning vision of a reconstituted holy land, with a New Jerusalem and temple complex at its center, complements Isaiah’s conclusion. His book concludes with a 9-chapter portrayal of a reconstituted geography of the eastern Mediterranean, fresh water flowing into the Dead Sea, and city-temple complex with a new name: YHWH is there (Ezek. 43:6–8). Again, there are so many connections with the New Testament. Suffice it to say in this context that John’s concluding vision in the Apocalypse is the final scriptural fulfillment of Isaiah and Ezekiel’s territorial visions and transformed community where YHWH is there.

*Death and New Life:* In his incomparable vision of a valley of dry and defiling bones, Ezekiel finds himself squarely in the midst of death (Ezek. 37:1–14). Death, metaphorical and literal, depicts the exile and its consequences. The exile is a corporate grave for the whole house of Israel. The living God, who breathed the breath of life in the first earth creature, shows Ezekiel what it is like for dry bones to come together and to live again. Ezekiel can but trust and prophesy. God will do the rest.

We can say by way of summary that the exile, the result of Israel’s greatest failure, resulted also in the greatest expansion of transformational thought in the Old Testament and provided the primary building blocks of New Testament eschatology as well.

## Deuteronomy

The impact of exile also plays a role in the book of Deuteronomy, the capstone of the Torah. Deuteronomy presents Israel poised on the edge of the Promised Land, with Moses giving, as it were, a last will and testament, mediating a covenant renewal for the second generation out of Egypt, and projecting the effects of blessing and curse for generations yet to come, including an exile of God’s people among nations, e.g. Deut. 30:1–10. Moses is rarely more prophetic than in Deuteronomy. A second generation from Egypt looks back over 40 years of rescue, hardship, judgment, and sustenance, and it looks forward to the tangible realization of God’s promise of a homeland, even as Moses instructs them of multi-generational challenges ahead.

Deuteronomy represents an already-not-yet hermeneutic at work. There is the already of deliverance from Egyptian slavery, foundational to Israel’s corporate life, and the not-yet consummation of covenant blessings, where the lures of Canaan and human fallibility are potent counterweights to Torah, and the spiritual life of any future generation hangs in the balance. The land of promise is also where mortal temptations reside; exile, while inevitable, is where repentance and new life will be birthed. Even as Israel is urged to choose life, its future blessing leads through an inevitable national failure in the land of promise and expulsion from it. That is the way that Torah ends. A future rupture of the Sinai covenant will occur, God will disperse Israel among the nations, while in exile God will circumcise Israelite hearts, and the people will return to him.

*Deut. 30:3 and Jer. 29:14.* As noted, Moses is rarely more prophetic than in Deuteronomy. Seven times the verb **sub** is used in 30:1–10, playing on its connotations of turning and returning. The verb is a prophetic term for repentance: The turning of direction in heart, will, and physical action. Prophets urge people to repent and they announce that God will enable repentance. In Deut. 30:3, God will restore the fortunes, literally “turn a turning” for his people. It is a common phrase for a positive change of circumstance (cf. Job 42:10), using the verb **sub** and a cognate accusative. Jeremiah uses the phrase 11 times, the most of any Old Testament book. When Israel is in exile, says Deuteronomy, God will circumcise the people’s heart, so that a physical return to the land of promise also entails the renewal of their spiritual relationship (Deut. 30:6; Jer. 4:4).

Jeremiah correspondingly pleaded with Judah to undertake rigorous self-examination and to circumcise, metaphorically, its collective heart. What God's people failed to do, God would do in and through them, bringing them through the other side of judgment to restoration. Moses sounds like Jeremiah and Jeremiah sounds like Moses.

*Torah and exile:* In the Torah, exile is the result of Israel's failure to maintain the covenant God graciously granted to them. Covenant breaking leads to a self-incurred curse; divinely initiated repentance on Israel's part is a means of restoration. For all of the language about doing the commandments, it is clear in Deuteronomy that Israel's repentance is not self-generated, but depends on God's initiative. It is spiritual heart-surgery.

Mark Boda has recently published a volume on repentance in the Bible. Here is a conclusion worth some reflection: "The theme of repentance is closely related throughout the Old Testament canon to the exilic phase of redemptive history."<sup>4</sup> I would expand by saying that in response to the rupture of exile Israel is drawn into identity reflection and penitence unmatched in literary output elsewhere in the Old Testament. God's self-revelation through the period of exile in judging Israel and announcing redemptive transformation is as fully set forth in the Old Testament as is his revelation in other event. The only possible rival would be God's self-revelation in the exodus from Egypt.

## Lamentations

Let's take a brief look at this intersection of exile, reflection on identity, and penitence through the lens of the book of Lamentations. It is a collection of bitter and poignant poems with several voices, all of which lament Jerusalem's humiliation and demise at the hand of the Babylonians and their lackeys. There is no reference to God speaking in Lamentations; it preserves what a humiliated and judged people say to God when a theological narrative about election goes awry in a historical moment. It does not offer an eschatological turn in the future like the prophets.

An unnamed man in chapter 3 does affirm that God's mercies are new every morning, but he goes on to confess movingly that the community should examine its ways and return to the Lord, noting that such a thing is a matter of the heart as well as ritual (Lam. 3:40–42). Poignantly, he also laments that God has not forgiven them. How does he know that God is yet to forgive the people? Apparently it is because Jerusalem sits in ruins and Jews are still in exile at the time of composition. Note the book's conclusion: Lam. 5:21–22. The Lord is implored to restore the people to himself and to renew them as in previous days—there is the historical

narrative of election at work—even as the corporate voice raises the horrible question of a counter narrative at work, namely, whether God has utterly rejected them and there is no way back? What a way to end a biblical book!

So what does one do with these laments, once restoration is underway in Judah? Do you set them on the shelf as historical artifact? There is an important text in the post-exilic book of Zechariah that poses a similar question. According to Zech. 7:1–7, there was a custom of mourning and fasting in the fifth month, the month of Av, the same month in which the Babylonians destroyed the temple.

The question apparently is whether fasting and entreating the Lord during this month should continue, given the fact that now a second temple had been constructed in Jerusalem and there are priests of the Lord at work there. The immediate answer is oblique, in that it comes in the form of a question regarding whether the fasting in the last 70 years was for God or for another purpose. The 70 years is a reference to the exilic period (so Jeremiah, Daniel). In Zech. 8:19–20 the prophet says that current fasts in the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> months shall eventually become times of joy and cheerful festivals, although a timetable is not provided.

Back to the 5<sup>th</sup> month fast: Such a regularized time of mourning during the exile is the best setting for the poems that now comprise the book of Lamentations. What does one do with mournful practices intended to lament a circumstance now under reversal? For some, the answer was keep performing and fasting. A thousand years later, Judaism regularized the reading of Lamentations on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av as part of its liturgical year. In a striking act of telescoping, the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av ceremony calls to mind the destruction of both the first temple by the Babylonians and second temple by the Romans in AD 70. It has not turned the 5<sup>th</sup> month fast into a cheerful festival, regardless of what Zech. 8 projected for the future.

The rehearsal of pain and shame in Lamentations almost overshadows the confession and repentance that are also there. Why, we might ask, is this rehearsal so emphatic? Historically, one can answer by saying that it reflects the raw emotions of those who lived through Judah's tragic demise, but the effect of rehearsal on subsequent generations inevitably has other dynamics. Santayana's proverb is surely relevant here: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

In the case of Lamentations, rehearsal of the impact of suffering can be understood as a teaching device to be shared with subsequent generations, irrespective of the fact that Jerusalem and the temple were subsequently

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rebuilt. As providence would have it, the Romans destroyed the city and temple centuries later. In some sense of the phrase, history did repeat itself. Lamentations answers the perennial question, "Can God's people fail in the historical process?" with a somber "Yes." Those upon whom the destruction fell have an authoritative voice to share, a painful portrayal intended to guide future behavior. The poetry also assumes a larger narrative of God's election of Israel as it grapples with national collapse.

Lamentations works resolutely to hold up the impact of bad news for the important tasks of maintaining corporate memory and identity and in hope of future good news. It lets no one "off the hook" for systemic failure, even when voices ancient and modern cry out that such a corporate judgment is unfair. Once a year the synagogue gathers to recite the book of Lamentations and to recall the loss of the first and second temples. One day I hope that they will no longer do this because God's future transformation will sweep them up and Zechariah's prophecy will be realized: All the fasts will become cheerful festivals.

What about Christians and our way of dealing with ecclesiastical demise? We do not have a 9<sup>th</sup> of Av ceremony and there is nothing that says we have to read and meditate on Lamentations regularly as a way to see

our particular predicament. Speaking personally, I want to cling to the prophetic model, whereby a historic moment of failure ushers in dramatic new ways of presenting the divine-human relationship, ways that are surely congenial with the paradigm of cross and resurrection in the New Testament. Good Friday's death leads through Saturday's deathly exile to the resurrection of Easter morning. I can hold also to the Torah's proclamation that when my tribe and I are in exile, God can perform a miracle on our collective heart. But there is something both foreboding and formative about looking systemic failure squarely in the eye and admitting that I am complicit and feel helpless.

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<sup>1</sup> Kirsten Powers cited in Sarah Pullam Bailey, "Moore on the Margins," *Christianity Today* Sept. 2015, 33.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah. A Commentary on the Infancy Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 596.

<sup>3</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 470.

<sup>4</sup> Mark J. Boda, *'Return to Me.' A Biblical Theology of Repentance* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2014), 159.

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