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Wayne A. Kobes

Dordt College, wayne.kobes@dordt.edu

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Answering Your Question: Creeds and Confessions

Abstract

"The church could well benefit from a clear, contemporary statement of the essentials of the Christian faith in language that speaks to 21st century people."

Posting about the value of new creeds and confessions in the church from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/answering-your-question-creeds-and-confessions/>

Keywords

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Answering Your Question: Creeds and Confessions

 [all in allthings.org/answering-your-question-creeds-and-confessions/](https://www.allthings.org/answering-your-question-creeds-and-confessions/)

Wayne Kobes

How active (if at all) should Christians be in crafting new creeds and confessions for their institutions, organizations, and churches? Creeds and confessions are supposed to be current representations of Christian belief and identity – in form and in content, much like translations. When Bible translations cease to serve their function, new ones come along (and, usually, legitimately so). Shouldn't this happen with creeds and confessions as well? (Because most of the staff involved in Reformed institutions usually pay lip service to creedal requirements and that can't be good.)

Throughout the history of the New Testament church, creeds have served believers in a variety of ways. The liturgical life of the church has led to the writing of a number of creeds, especially in connection with the sacrament of baptism. Some were written to serve in the teaching ministry of the church, such as the [Heidelberg Catechism](#) and [Westminster Confession of Faith](#), which clarified the church's understanding of Scripture and its central teachings. Still others, like the [Belgic Confession](#), stated the church's biblical stance in response to heresies that threatened the life and ministry of the believing community. Today, alongside the ecumenical creeds of the early church, we find a rich variety of confessions that have emerged in nearly all the Christian traditions — Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, and more.

The question asked is a good one — should Christians today be crafting new confessions that speak more clearly to the contemporary context? Let me discuss a few things to consider as we reflect on this.

First, we can look at how creeds and confessions are used (or not used) in the church today. The questioner suggests that too often Reformed Christians merely pay lip service to the creeds and confessions that are to shape the life of the church or Christian organization. I agree that this is often the case. Those holding office in Reformed churches are usually required to sign their agreement with the teachings laid out in the Reformed confessions. I haven't heard of congregations quizzing their elders and deacons on what the Reformed confessions teach, but I suspect that if such a practice were instituted it could be a major embarrassment! If this is true of those leading our congregations, it is likely also the case among other members of the church.

What do we say about this situation? In part it suggests the failure of church education to lead believers into a deeper understanding of the Reformed faith. Little is expected of church members and members respond accordingly. I fear a similar situation prevails in regard to our knowledge of the Bible itself. Why is this the case? Typical explanations include low expectations for spiritual growth of church members, individuals and families who have embraced an overly busy lifestyle, the decline of reading and time for reflection in contemporary culture, the influence of the fast and fleeting “information” of the internet and social media in place of “deep thinking” and meditation, and a sense that a person's “spiritual life” is a personal matter unique to each individual.

Whatever the causes of the current lack of interest in and knowledge of the creeds and confessions, some have argued that we simply no longer live in a “creed writing time.” Recent attempts of some churches to formulate new creeds and confessions could be seen as confirming this view. Denominations have written

and approved new confessions in the past several decades, but few have captured the hearts of the members of those churches. Modern creeds generally have not been able to rally people to a unity in the faith and as decisive witnesses to Christ, they more often have served to divide the churches that produced them.

Are we to conclude, then, that it would be foolish to attempt to write a confession for today? I don't think so. The church could well benefit from a clear, contemporary statement of the essentials of the Christian faith in language that speaks to 21st century people. But I would add that the writing of a contemporary confession should not be seen as replacing the historic confessions of the past. Confessing Christ faithfully today requires that we are firmly and deeply rooted in Scripture and that we are informed by the faithful witness of those believers who have gone before us. The New Testament word for "confess" literally means "to say the same thing or to agree with what was spoken before." Early creeds and confessions of the Reformation tended to take up into their confession large portions of earlier creedal statements. For example, the [Nicene Creed](#) restates and basically expands the earlier Apostles' Creed in order to address the threat of Arianism, and the Heidelberg Catechism includes the Apostles' Creed and a commentary on it as part of its confession. In addition, we should be in conversation with our brothers and sisters in the global church as well as have a significant understanding of contemporary culture and the dominant spirits of our time. Failure to take any of these aspects seriously will result in a confession that is either irrelevant, unbiblical, or simply echoes the prevailing ideas of the dominant culture, rather than powerfully proclaiming the gospel for our time.

History has shown that simply appointing a committee to write a new confession seldom produces one that captures the hearts of God's people or speaks powerfully to the church and the world. It seems that meaningful confessions are born in times of spiritual crisis for the church. Perhaps such a time is rapidly coming upon followers of Christ in North America.

Finally, a comment about church confessions and Christian organizations and institutions. While "creedal statements" written by Christian schools and colleges and other Christian organizations may not always be designated as "creeds" or "confessions," they are nonetheless important proclamations and guides as believers try to live out the gospel teachings in these significant areas of life. These "mission statements" also will only speak biblically and powerfully to the contemporary situation if they are rooted in a deep understanding of the Bible, have a firm grasp of the witness of God's people in these areas in the past, reflect the insights of the global church, and grow out of a clear understanding of the issues of the present situation.

When Christians take the faith seriously, understand the claims of Christ in all areas of life, have a deep knowledge of the Bible, and hear the voices of their brothers and sisters around the globe and across the ages, they will be situated to bring the gospel of the risen Christ in clear and meaningful confessions that address today's situation.