

Sola Scriptura and the Legitimacy of Confessions, Ecclesiastical Authority,
and Christian Tradition

Roy A. Bradley

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Dr. Seth Ehorn

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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 *sola Scriptura* was hammered out.¹ 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.”² This is significant in that it indicates continuity within the Reformed tradition on this point—and continuity is often a sign of 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 *do* 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.”³ Even theological methodology itself must be derived from Scripture.

This Reformed “Scripture principle,” as it may be called, 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 contents of Holy Writ.

¹ R. Michael Allen, *Reformed Theology*. Doing Theology. (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2010), 7.

² Ibid. 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.” Quoted in Philip Schaff. *The History of the Reformation*. 3rd ed. Sec. 3.1, vol. 8, bk. 2. History of the Christian Church. (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910.) Accessed May 27, 2017. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/hcc8.iv.iv.ii.html>. And Chapter 1, article 1 of the WCF states that the Holy Scriptures are “most necessary.”

³ Ibid., 135.

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. Doesn't the Scripture principle outlined above preclude the authority of confessions and the ecclesiastical traditions they spawn?⁴ 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.⁵ (italics mine)

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."⁶

John Webster defines a creed or confessional formula as "an indication of the gospel that is set before us in the scriptural witness."⁷ 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."⁸ As such, it functions 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

⁴ The radical reformers, beginning with the Anabaptists, generally answered "yes" to this question.

⁵ Philip Schaff. *The History of the Reformation*, Sec. 3.1.

⁶ John Webster. "Confession and Confessions." In *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism*, edited by Christopher R. Seitz. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001), 120, 130.

⁷ Ibid., 124.

⁸ Ibid., 124-25.

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.”⁹

In similar fashion, Kevin Vanhoozer (an admirer of Webster¹⁰) employs a helpful analogy by suggesting that the relationship that a drama script has to its performance illustrates the relationship between Scripture and tradition in the way that it applies to the church’s ever-reforming, ever-confessing nature.¹¹ 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*.¹² (italics mine)

Likewise, Webster claims that “confession is *act* or *event* before it is *document*. [...] Confession is a permanently occurring event.” But still the question remains: How does the Scripture principle bear upon this dynamic understanding of confessions, authority, and tradition?

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, authority, and tradition. It is clear, then, that a thorough trinitarian theology must undergird a coherent view of

⁹ Webster, “Confession and Confessions,” 122.

¹⁰ 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/>.

¹¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005). Referenced by Allen, *Reformed Theology*, 138.

¹² Allen, *Reformed Theology*, 138.

confessions and their function.¹³ “Reformed theology has a remarkable doctrine of the Holy Spirit,” says Allen.¹⁴ In contrast to “otherworldly supernaturalism,” the Reformed view of the Spirit recognizes that God the Spirit gives life through “varied instruments.”¹⁵ Just as the Spirit brings forth and works through the means of Scripture, so He also works through confessions, yet in a different, albeit powerful, way. Webster confirms this: “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.”¹⁶ It is the Spirit’s work through Scripture that renders confessions and their authority viable for the church.¹⁷ Ultimately, “Holy Scripture is prior to and superior to all acts of confession.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, confession as an ongoing spiritual activity is “a human echo of the electing mercy of God”—it is “an act of loyalty.”¹⁹

This secondary role of confession is 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.”²⁰ The mediating principle at work between them is the Holy Scriptures. Pastors are representatives of Jesus’s rule as it was “passed along to his apostles and their

¹³ “...[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, 122.

¹⁴ Allen, 133.

¹⁵ Ibid., 134.

¹⁶ Webster, 122.

¹⁷ “[T]he act of confession originates in revelation.” Ibid., 121.

¹⁸ Ibid., 125.

¹⁹ Ibid., 125-26.

²⁰ Allen, 144.

followers.”²¹ 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. 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.²² 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 as “one of the primary and defining activities of the church.”²³

In summary, “Reformed theology is committed to the sole final authority of the Bible, to be read amongst the church and under the authority of her official confessions.”²⁴

²¹ Ibid.

²² Webster, 131.

²³ Ibid., 119, 131.

²⁴ Allen, 155. This balanced perspective of the relationship between Scripture and tradition is yet another application of the “non-competitive” view of divine and human agency. “[T]he Spirit’s agency and human agency are neither cooperative nor mutually exclusive, but truly concursive.” Allen, 134.

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