

Introduction

Brief statements of key doctrines have been with us since the beginning of biblical history. They often focus on God and the way of salvation. Old Testament readers encounter in the capstone of the books of Moses, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” ([Deuteronomy 6:4](#)). New Testament readers overhear Paul summarizing to the Corinthians his own teaching, “I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” ([1 Corinthians 15:3-5](#)).

The desire to state truth openly is a basic Christian instinct. Cults hide things. Christ’s disciples share what they have learned. Unsurprisingly, historians have found dozens of summaries of scriptural teaching from the centuries following the ascension of Christ and the deaths of his apostles. It was not unusual for such statements to begin with the Latin word *credo*, meaning, “I believe.” These early creeds, like those in the Scriptures, often focused on what the church understood to be true about God, or on what is and is not true about the person of Christ, or on what we must believe about the work of Christ as savior.

As it happens, later creeds tended to be longer than earlier ones. By the time of the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s, so much had been learned—and so many doctrines were being disputed between the Reformers and Rome—that creeds were supplemented by longer lists of doctrines that Christians confessed. Creeds were still in use, most often in worship, but now confessions were written to explain what Lutheran and Reformed Christians believed. These confessions carefully explained what doctrines were held in common with the old faith of Rome while also stating clearly where the Reformers were forced to disagree with Rome in their recovery of the teachings of the early church and, most basically, of the Bible. They also explained where the Reformers disagreed with one another.

Naturally, because confessions say more, more confessions were needed. Here we find a contrast with creeds. Creeds have a wide circulation among Christian churches. One creed can serve Baptists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Lutherans alike. But these communions needed something more precise than a creed if they were to possess working documents that united like-minded missionaries and church members, if they were to train teachers of the Word successfully, or if they wished to advance clear communication between preachers and parishioners, with the one seeking a place to serve and the other seeking a pastor.

While not typically *used* in worship, these confessions were *useful* for worship. Careful distinctions provided richer material for praise than did broad generalizations. Saying more about the character of God and the grace of the gospel encouraged more confidence in prayer. Confessions also paid careful attention to precise terminology, a kind of labeling that promoted learning. Such a technique has proved useful in studies of the natural world and of language; it is useful in the study of the Bible, too.

Concerning justification, for example, the Scriptures speak of a righteousness of Christ credited to those who do not deserve it. They also speak of a free gift of forgiveness purchased by Christ for sinners. Sometimes the Bible tethers this righteousness to justification. And sometimes it ties forgiveness to justification. The authors of Reformation confessions noted these associations of words and ideas. They did not see tension or confusion. On the contrary, they concluded that *justification* must be the Bible’s umbrella term for a credited righteousness, on the one hand, and divine forgiveness, on the other—two distinct but united aspects of the one doctrine of justification.

In light of such detail, discovered after careful study of the Scriptures, it is hardly possible for an attentive Christian to be content with only and always speaking of “salvation” in general. Once alert to fuller teaching, Christians ought to explain and then celebrate justification. And then one discovers adoption, then the blessing of sanctification, then perseverance, and so on. The Reformation-era confessions identify, explain, and celebrate these gifts with gratitude: through such statements we confess our faith to God and before the world.

Creeds and confessions most obviously serve a doctrinal purpose. Nonetheless, if they have sufficient gravitas, they enjoy an ecumenical purpose as well. These historic statements remind us that the content of the Christian faith does not continually change; they bring Christians of the present into conversation with Christians of the past. Classic creeds and confessions also remind us that we do not read the Bible only as individuals; we read the Bible as one body, experiencing significant unity as we do so. These are things that a list of bullet points on a church website cannot do. Such lists may have the *form* of a creed, but they will never have the full *function* of a creed.

Four of the better-known creeds of the early church, two of which were written by ecumenical councils, are printed here for the use of individuals and churches. The confessions and catechisms that follow are particularly significant texts in Protestant

history. These are defining documents for Lutherans, Anglicans, the Dutch Reformed, Presbyterians, and Baptists. Sometimes with slight adjustments, they have been used by many millions of Christians.

These creeds and confessions are printed with the Bible not to give them equal standing with Scripture—nothing could rise to the level of this library of sixty-six books from God. Creeds and confessions are useful only to the extent that they reproduce faithfully the teaching of Scripture itself. But printing them here will serve Christians well in their attempt to understand one another better; it will help us to listen quietly when we too often talk noisily. And doing so will serve as a helpful teaching tool for churches, perhaps offering paragraphs that can be incorporated into worship in order to help God's people state what they believe, confess their sin, and profess faith in Christ, all by the power of his Spirit.

For individuals, adding one more bookmark to a Bible will enable readers to benefit not only from their daily reading in the Scriptures but also from a paragraph or a set of questions and answers that summarize Christian truth in profoundly helpful ways.