



ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”



Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian
Students

Presented by the
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American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life’s urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today’s Christian students to become tomorrow’s Christian leaders.

—[Kevin T. Bauder](#)

“...Be instant in season,
out of season;
reprove, rebuke, exhort
with all longsuffering
and doctrine.”

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October 28, 2005

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The First Baptist Distinctive

Part Five: Creeds and Confessions

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This essay is by
[Kevin T. Bauder](#),
president of Central
Baptist Theological
Seminary. Not every
one of the professors,
students, or alumni
of Central Seminary
necessarily agrees
with every opinion
that it expresses.

One might think that Baptists, with their strong allegiance to Biblical authority (particularly New Testament authority), might reject any authoritative role for creeds and confessions. A glance at Baptist history, however, reveals that wherever Baptists have existed they have busied themselves with drafting confessions of faith. How can this incessant creed-making be reconciled with the Baptists’ profession that they derive their faith and conduct from the Bible alone? The answer to this question lies in the nature of creedal authority, or in the way that Baptists use confessions.

For Baptists, creeds and confessions are simply summaries of what they believe the Bible teaches. Accepting the Bible’s authority does little good if one seriously misunderstands what it teaches. Some cults have even claimed to accept the authority of the Bible while denying fundamental doctrines of the gospel. For this reason, Christians have found it necessary to develop short summaries of important biblical teachings. That is what creeds and confessions are: summaries of what we believe the Bible teaches. All Christian confessions articulate teachings that distinguish Christians from non-Christians. Often, they also enumerate teachings that distinguish their adherents from other groups of Christians.

Some Baptists have attempted to distinguish creeds from confessions and to insist that Baptists are confessional but not creedal. Confessions, they say, are merely descriptive, while creeds are prescriptive. In other words, a confession of faith is a summary of what the members of a church or denomination actually *do* believe. A creed, on the other hand, is a statement of what the members of the group *must* believe. Creeds are normative, while confessions are simply expressive.

Most Baptists have rejected this distinction between creeds and confessions, and they have had good reason. Frankly, it is neither useful nor convincing. What good does it do for an organization to describe its most important beliefs if it does not intend to maintain those beliefs? And how is an organization to maintain its beliefs unless it intends to keep out (or put out) people who refuse to affirm those beliefs? Unless a church or denomination intends to enforce its confession, that confession will cease to be descriptive within a very short while.

Some Baptists have argued that an authoritative confession violates the principle of Biblical authority. How can the Bible be one's sole authority if one's confession is authoritative? The solution to this problem is to remember that the confession is simply a summary of what one (or one's group) believes that the Bible teaches. A confession has no authority of its own. Its only authority derives from Scripture, which is the true and only authority for doctrine and life. An organization may enforce belief in a confession only insofar as the teachings of the confession come from Scripture itself.

Suppose that a member of your church is caught embezzling. When challenged with his sin, he replies that he believes the Bible permits some forms of stealing and actually commands Christians to embezzle under some circumstances. He claims to acknowledge the authority of the Bible, but he understands the Bible to require that he embezzle. Furthermore, he insists that the church's stand against stealing is only descriptive and not prescriptive. He says that if the church actually tries to keep him from stealing, it is usurping the authority of Scripture. Therefore, he intends to continue the practice of embezzling, and there is nothing that the church can do about it.

Of course you would be incredulous, and so would all the other members of the church. You would not see any difference between enforcing the Bible's commands and enforcing the church's standard. You would insist that they were one and the same. You would argue that the whole reason the church stands against stealing is precisely because the Bible forbids it.

If a church can enforce practical standards without violating the absolute authority of the Bible, then it can enforce doctrinal standards as well. We insist that church members must not steal *because* the Bible forbids stealing. Similarly, we insist that they must not deny the deity of Christ *because* the Bible teaches that Jesus is God. When we adopt a confessional affirmation of the deity of Christ, our confession does not take the place of Scripture: it simply states what Scripture teaches. In no way does this diminish the Bible's own authority, and in no way does it make the confession a separate authority alongside the Bible.

Therefore, confessions may legitimately function to repel (or expel) those who do not share a body's view of what the Bible teaches. This is the negative function of confessions, but confessions also have a positive function. While they keep out those who do not share an organization's beliefs, they also attract those who do share the beliefs.

A well-written confession serves as an advertisement of an organization's doctrinal commitments. As such, it functions as an invitation to others who share those commitments. Christians who hold substantially the same beliefs as the confession will likely be drawn to the organization that adopted it.

In other words, the confession specifies the organization's basis of fellowship. We often think of fellowship as an activity, usually centered on eating and drinking. The actual meaning of "fellowship," however, is that something is held in common. In Christian organizations, one of the things that must be held in common is a body of true beliefs that have been drawn from the Bible. Those who hold these beliefs are appropriate subjects of fellowship, while those who deny the beliefs are not. The function of a creed or confession is to enumerate the beliefs thought to be biblical, that are held in common by all the members of a given organization.

Baptists have adopted creeds and confessions from their very earliest days. Sometimes these confessions have been individual statements of belief. Sometimes churches have issued them. Often they have been adopted by associations, conventions, conferences, and other organizations. Furthermore, Baptists have regularly used their confessions as a way of determining who could fellowship with the group and who could not.

The presence of these creeds and confessions in no way contradicts the first of the Baptist distinctives. Baptists affirm the absolute, final authority of the New Testament in all matters of church faith and order. They appeal to the New Testament alone to determine the nature, mission, polity, and ordinances of the church. They build their theory of the church from the positive statements of the New Testament rather than superimposing their own ideas upon its silence. They regard the New Testament as the constitution of the church, and from that commitment flow all of their other distinctives. But they have consistently—even persistently—chosen to express in creedal form the teachings that they believe are both biblical and most important. And they have not hesitated to enforce those teachings as tests of fellowship. ✠



Psalm 19
Scottish Psalter (1650)

God's law is perfect, and converts
The soul in sin that lies:
God's testimony is most sure,
And makes the simple wise.

The statutes of the Lord are right,
And do rejoice the heart:
The Lord's command is pure and doth
Light to the eyes impart.

Unspotted is the fear of God,
And doth endure forever;
The judgments of the Lord are true
And righteous altogether.

They more than gold, yea, much fine gold,
To be desired are;
Than honey, honey from the comb
That droppeth, sweeter far.

Moreover, they thy servant warn
How he his life should frame:
A great reward provided is
For them that keep the same. ✕



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Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis | [Contact Us](#)
900 Forestview Ln N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 1-800-827-1043 |
www.centralseminary.edu