

“PROFESSION OF OUR FAITH.”

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First Christian Reformed Church
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Sermon Texts: I Timothy 6:12-14; II Timothy 3:14-15

Introduction.

When I arrived here as your pastor in October of 2007, I immediately started preaching through the Heidelberg Catechism. I preached through most of the 129 questions in 87 sermons over nearly three years.

Then after a bit of a break at the beginning of 2011, I preached through the five major points of doctrine in the Canons of Dort in 25 sermons.

Then at the beginning of 2012, I preached a brief series through the Belhar Confession. We spent the rest of 2012 on the Minor Prophets.

This evening I am announcing the beginning of a series of sermons on the 37 articles of the Belgic Confession. This will complete our study of the three standards of unity that are the theological backbone of all the denominations that come out of the Netherlands.

Tonight I will begin with an introductory sermon on confessions in general. Next week I will give the background on the Belgic Confession and its history and author. And then we will begin working our way through the Belgic Confession itself.

Tonight I want to remind us of the value and importance of creeds and confessions and why we should know and profess our faith.

Why Creeds and Confessions and Professions of Faith?

One of the great confessions of all time was made by the father of the demon possessed boy in Mark 9:24, “I believe, help my unbelief.”

That’s what the Latin word *credo* from which we get *creed* means, “I believe.” What do you believe? Does it matter what you believe? What difference does it make what you believe?

The first question of the great Westminster Catechism is, “What is the chief end of man?” And the famous answer is, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.”

What does that mean? First, it means that while we have other purposes or priorities in life, our chief or first purpose or priority is to glorify God. What does that mean, “to glorify God”? How do you do that?

Calvin tells us that the “glory of God is when we know what He is.”

Augustine said, “Thou hast created us for Thyself, O God, and our heart is restless until it finds rest in Thee.” *We glorify God by believing in Him, by confessing Him before men*, by loving and defending His truth, by showing the fruits of the Spirit in our lives, by worshiping Him.

Joy comes from believing in God. Peace and hope come from believing in God. Eternal life comes from believing, from a good confession.

What you believe affects everything, your outlook on life, your other priorities, how you spend and uses your resources, what you think about death and how you approach death.

Along with that father all of us should pray again and again, “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.”

A creed or confession of faith is not the very voice of Divine Truth, but, as one person put it so well, they are *an echo of that Truth* from souls that have heard and studied the truth and believed it in their hearts and felt its power and surrendered to it and have summarized it in writing for others to understand.

By way of another analogy, creeds and confessions are maps to guide us in finding our way through all that God has revealed in His Word. A map is only as good as its accuracy to the real geography. This is the value of a *good* confession.

The day the church loses interest in the creeds and confessions is the day the church starts to get lost and wander in the wilderness doubt and opinion and relativism and heresy.

In this post-Christian age that’s increasingly antagonistic to religion in general and Christianity in particular it’s more and more important for us to know what we believe and why and how to stand up for it and defend it.

Here are seven reasons why our creeds and confessions are important, seven useful purposes they serve in our lives.

Seven Useful Purposes for Creeds and Confessions.

Unity. In Ephesians 4 we read the seven-fold unity of the church of Jesus Christ:

Ephesians 4:4-6 There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Our three Reformed creeds and confessions are called our Standards of Unity. They summarize what binds us together and holds us together, they summarize and clarify our one faith.

Our unity is not just with Christians all over the world who confess the same faith, but our unity is with our forefathers of the faith. We are affirming what generations of saints have affirmed. We stand on the shoulders of countless Christians through the ages.

Our faith is not a new faith, it’s not some latest fad. Our faith is an historical faith. Our faith has been professed before and we are called to profess it again.

One great problem in our time is that a desire for false unity is being pressed at the expense of the truth. New creeds are written to be watered down until they can include everyone. It’s a false unity, the appearance of unity in the face of great disagreement over doctrine.

The Belgic Confession is one third of our three standards of unity that summarizes the truth of the Word of God and declares what we believe and where we stand. In this is our unity.

Instruction. They are a tool for teaching and passing on what we believe, for organizing our thoughts and identifying what is most important. They give us a framework for passing on our faith.

II Timothy 3:14-15 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it 15 and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Timothy's mother and grandmother passed on the faith to him from infancy. The helpful news is that each generation of parents and grandparents and pastors don't have to start from scratch, we have the work done for us.

Creeds and confessions are useful tools for transmitting our faith. We have this treasure in earthen vessels that we want to pass on and leave as an inheritance.

The purpose is not just to know the truth, but to love the truth. The purpose is for the truth to be sweeter than honey.

Psalms 19:9-11 the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever;
the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether.
10 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.
11 Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

This is the primary responsibility of parents and especially of fathers. Paul instructs fathers not to exasperate their children, but to "bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4).

Psalms 78:4-7 We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.
5 He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children,
6 that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn,
and arise and tell them to their children,
7 so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments.

Standard. Unwritten rules are more easily broken or ignored. The creeds and confessions are tools for discipline and accountability. By these standards the elders are called to hold pastors accountable and to hold each other and the deacons accountable and to hold church members accountable.

Our three standards of unity give us a concise tool for measuring the Biblical integrity and orthodoxy of pastors and candidates for ministry. They help a classis be the gatekeeper and to keep false shepherds out, those who come like sheep in wolves clothing.

In America you can believe whatever you want to believe and you can interpret the Bible any way you want. But if you want to be an elder or a pastor in the CRC you cannot do that, you have to submit to the Standards and affirm that they are an accurate submission to Scripture.

Imagine for a moment if we didn't have any creeds or confessions or statements of faith. What would we be left with? Just the Bible right. Well how bad would that be? Having just the Bible is great until we start listening to everyone's differing opinions and interpretations. Without any creeds or confessions we are left to interpret on our own without any assistance from the wisdom of the ages, without the help of the saints who have gone before us.

The creeds help us discern truth from error and they help us know what is of central importance in the Bible so we are not easily distracted by peripheral matters.

Charles Hodge helps when he says, "The real question is not, as often pretended, between the Word of God and the creed of man, but between the tried and proved faith of the collective body of God's people, and the private judgment and the unassisted wisdom of the repudiator of creeds." Should we trust in the collective interpretation of Scripture by godly men from the past? Or should we trust in our own individualistic interpretation?

The purpose of creeds are "to clarify the Christian faith and to distinguish true content from error and false representations of the faith." We especially need that today. Simply put we start with the Bible and then proceed to stating our confession of what the Bible teaches.

This keeps us from having to reinvent the wheel every generation.

Preserve. They help us maintain orthodoxy, contend for the truth, and recognize what is unchanging from generation to generation. Paul told Timothy to fight the good fight of faith and to hold firmly to what you believe. Why did Paul say that? Why did he say it that way? Why do we have to fight for our faith? Why do you have to fight for anything? You have to fight when there is an enemy or opposition, when there is someone or something trying to steal something from you.

The language of Scripture is filled with images of warfare and fighting and defending.

"Hold fast the form of sound words" (2 Tim. 1:13).

"Contend earnestly for the faith which was once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

"Stand fast with one spirit, with one soul striving for the faith of the gospel" (Phil. 1:27).

"The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph. 6:17).

Our faith has enemies, enemies in the world, enemies in the spirit world and enemies in our own hearts. Temptations and sins and idols and demons abound in our world.

Moses had to fight Pharaoh. David fought Goliath and his own sin. Jesus fought the Pharisees, Paul fought the Judaizers. Tertullian fought the heretic Marcion. Athanasius stood against Arius and the world in his defense of the Trinity. Augustine fought against Pelagius. Luther fought against kings and princes and popes. Calvin did the same. John Knox fought against Queen Mary. And the author of the Belgic Confession, Guido de Bres, defended the faith of the Reformers in the Netherlands against the Spaniards.

Creeds and confessions are by their nature controversial. They are born out of conflict and debate and argument. They are a defense of a faith under attack. Wars have been waged over creeds and confessions, people have laid down their lives for what they believe.

Part of the weakness of the church in America today is we have lost the will to fight. We don't know what we stand for so we sit down. We cave in at the first sight of conflict and retreat into our silence.

Beware when all men speak well of you.

Beware when you believe nothing strongly enough to create conflict.

Beware if you don't believe anything worth dying for.

Beware if you care more about being respectable than you do being truthful.

Beware if you fear man's opinion more than you fear God and His opinion.

God fought the fight for us to the death, will we not stand and fight for the faith?

Thank God for the blood of the martyrs that defended our faith and secured the truth for the next generation.

Thank God for those who sacrificed and suffered. Thank God for those of whom the world is not worthy. Thank

God for those who paid the ultimate sacrifice.

May we not shrink back, may we not dishonor them, may we be found worthy of so great a gospel. When our hour comes may we be faithful.

Witness. They are a light to those outside the faith. They help us articulate our faith and give an answer to those who ask us about the hope we have.

Romans 10:8-11 “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); 9 because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. 11 For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.”

Many evangelicals today think it’s enough to believe in Jesus in your heart. But Scripture says more. We must believe in our hearts and confess with our lips. And what we say with our mouth strengthens our faith and our assurance.

I know how much I benefit by preaching and teaching the creeds and confessions. It reinforces my faith, it strengthens my belief, it increases my confidence in the truth of God’s Word.

A creed says what we believe, I believe. I believe in my heart.
A confession says what we confess, I confess. I confess with my mouth.

The Belgic Confession is a comprehensive summary of what the Word of God teaches. It begins, “We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth that ...”

We live in an unbelieving age, in a post-Christian culture. If we are going to be salt and light we have to know what we believe and what we are willing to confess before man.

Judge. They are the standard by which we can weigh and judge all new teachings and winds of doctrine. They enable us to discern what is good and true from what is bad and false. They are a means for us to test the spirits, to test the preachers and teachers of the newest and greatest things. The standards help us draw lines between truth and error, between orthodoxy and heterodoxy or heresy, between true religion and cults.

They remind us that we are not alone, we are not making this up as we go, we are not the first ones to think about these issues. We stand on the shoulders of our fathers in the faith.

Application and conclusion.

The times are changing. There are new issues and challenges facing the church and this calls for Christians to do the hard work of thinking, praying and writing what we believe.

These days call for making good confessions. And we need sound words that guard the good deposit of the gospel entrusted to the church. Because of the errant doctrines that have found their way into the church we need to test what men write and see that it comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith

We must be willing to oppose all actions that are opposed to Scripture and we must be willing to oppose all doctrine that is opposed to Scripture. May God have mercy and grant us courage and wisdom. To God be all the glory.