



THE IMPORTANCE OF CREEDS IN THE CONFESSION OF CHRIST¹

I speak to you today as a Christian minister of the Reformed tradition, whose privilege it has been to learn something of a reformer largely forgotten outside the Schwenkfeldian tradition. In doing so, I realize that while the victors write church history, in God's final and definitive version of it, Caspar Schwenckfeld may get a fairer deal than he has had thus far. I am glad therefore to speak of his notion of the school of Christ—the "locale" in which God's people learn spiritual discernment. I do so by addressing you on the importance of creeds.

THREE CHALLENGES

Coming as an outsider to this subject, I find there are three challenges that require addressing before getting to the subject at hand.

First, there is the question of historiography (the writing of history/study of historical writing). This issue is by no means unique to the Schwenkfeldian tradition. Since the decline of Christendom and the late eighteenth-century emergence of Enlightenment thought, the interpretation of the Reformation era has proven problematic for all interested parties. Competing theologically conservative and liberal interpretations of the Reformation traditions have vied for dominance within each tradition of theology it has spawned. I see this in my Reformed tradition. I also witnessed this rivalry among Lutherans in the mid-'90s as a student in Tübingen, Germany. Whereas some students maintained Luther was *evangelische* (liberal Protestant), others maintained he was *evangelikal* (conservative Protestant). Today

I discern a similar tension in Schwenkfeldian historiography. Indeed, second only to the General Conference's stance *vis-à-vis* Scripture is the question of whose side Schwenckfeld upholds amid the current diversity within the tradition.

Given this, we need to be very careful in the opinions we attribute to Schwenckfeld. No longer should we draw them uncritically from the popular secondary sources. The Reformation principle of *ad fontes* (back to the sources, which are largely German in this instance) requires us to confirm (or otherwise) the teaching of the secondary sources by reference to the primary ones. We then decide whether the undoubted teaching of Schwenckfeld comports with the teaching of Scripture.

Second, and following on, there is the question of hermeneutics (the study of biblical interpretation). I note for instance how Dr. Rothenberger, in *An Ecumenical Ideal*, draws a distinction in Schwenckfeld's thinking between a spiritual and literal interpretation of Scripture. Whereas Schwenckfeld is said to have held to the former as a means of preventing dissension in Christendom, the latter he considered responsible for strained theological theories.

This distinction is unfortunate for a number of reasons. For one thing, a spiritual reading of Scripture is as capable of causing dissension as a literal reading. Certainly, this was so in post-Enlightenment Romanticism, where the spiritual reading of Scripture became, in certain cases, a foil for circumventing the exegesis of Scripture, opening the way thereby for ideas at variance from those supportive of the

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historic doctrines of the faith. What theologians of the Romantic period accepted was not necessarily that which accorded with the Spirit's illumination and application of the Word, but what was acceptable to their own spirits ("inner light"). The literal reading of Scripture by contrast has habitually upheld the catholic doctrines of the faith.

Furthermore, for all the attraction of Schwenckfeld's emphasis on the spiritual interpretation of Scripture, I doubt the validity of its distinction from the literal interpretation, for the literal interpretation is, ideally, intensely spiritual. Not only does it fully recognize the Holy Spirit's authorship of the text through human means (2 Pet. 1:21), those holding best to the literal interpretation do so in dependence on the Spirit's illumination for their understanding of any given text, and how it may be applied in any particular circumstance.

Moreover, the problem with the distinction is that it is difficult to tell whether it is Schwenckfeld's or Dr. Rothenberger's. Either way the dichotomy is, in my opinion, not as helpful as Schwenckfeld and/or Rothenberger believed it to be.

What leads to strained theological theories is not the literal, but the literalistic interpretation of Scripture. While both may be found among conservatives, we ought not to presume that because a fringe minority go reaching for hacksaws to cut off their offending hands (Matt. 5:30), that all conservatives would do so. The majority of conservatives recognize without any problems that Jesus spoke proverbially. In doing so, they indicate their belief that while Scripture is divine it is also human. It is God's fully authoritative and inerrant Word, and yet, under the Spirit's sovereign supervision, the genres, styles, language and figures of speech reveal the human instrumentality in the Spirit's authorship of the Word.

Third, there is the question of creeds and confessions. Again, as a newcomer to the study of Schwenckfeld, I find myself confused. On the one hand, Dr. Rothenberger states in *An Ecumenical Ideal* that Schwenckfeld "formulated no creed, or system of doctrine," and yet the next page states that, "on many occasions and for various reasons Schwenckfeld set forth his confession of faith for many eminent and common persons alike." To square these statements, I am reliant on the forthcoming volume, *On Christian Beliefs: Eight Translations from the Corpus Schwenckfeldianorum* (edited by Dr. H. H. Drake Williams, III). In Schwenckfeld's *Deutsches Theologia*—published in 1560, the year prior to his death, and written in response to a request from Philip Melancthon that Caspar write a systematic summary of his theology—there is found an exposition of the Apostles' Creed. This exposition provides significant evidence of Schwenckfeld's attitude to creeds and confessions.

On the one hand, it seems that Schwenckfeld opposed not creeds and confessions as such, but their multiplication in what, after all, was a creed-making age. His reasoning appears to have been that the multiplication of confessions along the various lines of Reformation theology (whether Lutheran, Reformed, etc.) denies the oneness of the church. On the other hand, his acceptance of the validity of a minimalist creed such as the Apostles' Creed comports with his desire to witness the unity of the church. Minimalist creeds were acceptable to Schwenckfeld by dint of the fact that all Christians can subscribe to them. This, at least, is what Schwenckfeld's exposition of the Apostles' Creed implies to me.

If I am right, the question facing Schwenckfeld's followers today is not whether the orthodox creeds should be upheld (the gainsaying of which would contradict the oneness of the church—the very thing Schwenckfeld sought to avoid), but whether the creeds to which we subscribe should be minimalist or maximalist in their scope and in their detail.



FOUR USES

Either way, it is clear that there are now solid grounds for questioning Dr. Selina Schultz's interpretation of Schwenckfeld, especially when she writes that the "Christianity . . . Jesus Christ brought to the world . . . contained no theology" (*Caspar Schwenckfeld von Ossig*, 40). This view rests, I suggest, on an unfortunate approach to historiography, and flies in the face of Dr. Schulz's own work. Perhaps I am missing something, but how can we understand Schwenckfeld to have believed that Christianity is non-theological when his theological writings, which Selina Schulz helped edit, run to 19 volumes? Indeed, what does a non-theological Christianity look like? A secular charity comes to mind.

Thus, my working assumption in what follows is that Christianity is intensely theological and that the real question for Schwenckfeld was the sort of creed Christian people should subscribe to. By summarizing the import of creeds we may gain some clues as to what is best for the effective Schwenckfeldian confession of Christ today, and lay to rest the mistaken notion of a non-confessional Christianity. Such a contradiction in terms, is neither desirable nor possible; nor can it further the spiritual discernment of those enrolled in the school of Christ. A non-confessional, non-theological Christianity often culminates, sadly, in a heterodox (*i.e.* unorthodox) Christianity. Were this to become the plight of the General Conference, not only would the label "Schwenckfelder" be defunct, so would the name "Christian." For a non-confessional Christianity promises, it appears to me, historical and theological detachment from Schwenckfeld and, worse, from the Scriptures he loved.

Thus, having cleared the ground of the several confusions (historiographical, hermeneutical and confessional) that hinder the understanding of the theology of the Schwenckfeldian tradition, we come now to consider the value of creeds for confessing Christians.

First, creeds and confessions enable the church to mark and preserve her attainments in biblical and theological understanding.

What we often forget is that the possession of the Spirit is not only a personal privilege but a corporate one as well. In fact, the church was divinely intended to be the community of the Spirit. Not only do we have in our midst the Holy Scriptures (the inscripturated decrees [*dogmata*] of God) which the Spirit authored, the faithful have the Spirit in their hearts. It was the Spirit who Jesus said would teach and remind the apostles of all things (John 14:26). By reading the writings of the apostles, we in turn have learned, with the Spirit's help, the doctrine of the apostles. Following the examples of the early creeds found in Scripture (e.g., Matt. 28:19–20; Rom. 10:9–10; Phil. 2:9–11; 1 Cor. 15:3b–8), the church has summarized and codified the lessons the Spirit has been teaching us. This codification in creeds and confessions serves to mark our communal growth in understanding. Such creeds are, of course, subordinate to the Scriptures (*the* rule of faith and conduct). While they are authoritative in their own sphere, they can be adjusted, revised and even replaced. Such amendments, however, are not to undermine the truth that has been established previously by the Spirit in the minds and hearts of God's people.

Secondly, creeds and confessions discriminate between true and false claims to truth.

It is necessary to note in this postmodern age that the church has always assumed that truth is a reality. Truth is not simply what postmodernists call a "social construct"; that is, a creation of the Christian community (or any other community making truth claims). We believe what we believe because it has been divinely revealed to us. Christianity is what older theologians called a *revealed* religion (as opposed to one that is unrevealed). The church's creeds and confessions reflect her dependence on the inscripturated revelation



God has given us. Thus, the creeds and confessions we employ must present what is true to Scripture and do so in proportion to the place of each doctrinal truth in Scripture. Although they may present these truths positively (what each is) and negatively (what each is not), minimalist creeds such as the Apostles' Creed tend to curtail their statements to the positive declaration of main truths. Maximalist creeds, by contrast, give greater detail about a wider variety of biblical truths, while also providing statements that counter heterodox (unorthodox) doctrines or theories. Ideally, a basic affirmation of faith such as the Apostles' Creed suffices for entrance into church membership, but a maximalist creed is surely warranted for those called to be the teachers and preachers of God's people. The latter may be especially helpful in team ministries where doctrinal coherence among the ministerial staff is essential for presenting the congregation with a coherent and substantive understanding of what the local congregation or ministry teaches.

Third, creeds and confessions lay a sound basis for genuine ecumenical fellowship.

Creeds have sometimes been known as "symbolics," because they symbolized the visible unity of the church. Obviously, the pre-Reformation creeds, often known as the ecumenical creeds, served this purpose best. By the Reformation, however, creeds took on a more substantive quality as they came to represent the different theological traditions of the Reformation and post-Reformation eras. It was this multiplication of creeds, representing the multiplication of theological traditions within Christendom that Schwenckfeld appears to have reacted against.

In postmodernity, Christians are taking up a not so different stance from Schwenckfeld. Certainly, the proliferation of the "community church," stripped of tribal or denominational labels suggests this is so.

With her back against the wall in many parts of the western world, the church is coming to consider the old denominational rivalries a luxury of the past. To the fore now is what unites rather than what divides. Thus, there is a movement away from maximalist creeds that have undergone little revision from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in favor of more generic statements that embrace a greater number of Christians. We are in fact witnessing in our day a restoration of the ecumenical function of creeds and confessions. In their more minimalist garb, they represent what truly unites us.

However, all is not so straightforward. To forsake utterly the maximalist creeds of the church would be to jettison those documents that are admittedly weak when it comes to their ecumenical function but strong as markers of the church's growth in understanding. What the Schwenkfeldian tradition requires then is not simply a return to the use of the Apostles' Creed among her members, but a commitment by its ministers to maximalist confessionalism, cognizant of the progress in understanding of truth biblical Protestantism has experienced. Indeed, if I may be excused for drawing from my own Reformed tradition, I see in the writings of a theologian such as Herman Witsius (1636–1708) this dual appreciation of the roles of minimalist and maximalist confessions. As a preacher and Professor of Divinity he would have subscribed to a maximalist confession. And yet, such was the importance he placed on a minimalist creed like the Apostles' Creed, that he took the trouble to write two substantive volumes on it. Therein, he states that the Creed "is now so generally received in Christendom, that the man who wantonly rejects it, ought not to be esteemed a Christian" (*The Apostles' Creed*, vol. 1, reprint ed. [Escondido, CA: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1993], 14).

Fourth, creeds are instruments in the great work of popular instruction.

As summaries of biblical teaching, creeds and confessions are ideal in this regard. While they ought never to replace the study of the Bible



(our rule for faith and conduct), nevertheless they are most useful for summarizing its content. Thus, in addition to serving as authoritative statements of belief (in their own sphere, we recall), they may also be used to educate new converts (especially). Indeed, in the event of the awakening of society and the influx into the church of converts from the humanistic backgrounds of secularized societies, the church's creeds and confessions may once again come to be seen as invaluable tools for summarizing what Christians believe. Since such converts will not have had the benefit of years of Sunday School or nominal church attendance, the creeds may serve as accessible summaries of the main themes of biblical Christianity.

A minimalist creed will of course be more suited to the new convert. Writes Witsius: "These articles (those of the Apostles' Creed) which are . . . fundamental, ought to be known and believed by every Christian that has reached the years of discretion, by the learned and the unlearned, by the humblest mechanic no less than the Professor of Theology" (*The Apostles' Creed*, vol. 1, 27). And yet, the deeper we enter into our faith the greater should be our capacity to tackle the maximalist statements of faith. What is in doubt is not our ability to comprehend them, but our desire to give ourselves to the serious study of the faith. The problem is spiritual not intellectual.

CONCLUSION

If we are enrolled through repentance and faith in the school of Christ it is requisite that we appreciate the significance of creeds in the confession of Christ's glory.

First, they remind us that we stand as Christians on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. By imbibing and furthering their teaching we testify in this world before the heavenly cloud of witnesses with whom we share the same Spirit.

Second, creeds remind us that our confession of Christ's glory should not be content-less. The same Spirit who arouses doxology in our hearts and joy in our witness has given us the revelation to inform our the confession we make of Christ's glory. This revelation is codified superbly in many of the church's creeds and confessions, notably our Protestant ones. By their due appreciation and appropriation, we speak are empowered to speak intelligently to earnest inquirers in search of serious answers to serious questions.

Finally, our confession should be communal. We confess not in isolation but in community. Our constant attending to apostolic doctrine goes hand-in-hand with our commitment to Christian fellowship (Acts 2:42). Rooted in anything other than apostolic doctrine, such as the moving and treasured *history* of the Schwenkfelders, and our fellowship ceases to express genuine *Christian* community. Thus, church membership of the Schwenkfelders or any other historic grouping, must, at all costs, be decidedly Christian and not simply cultural. This much is expected of a *bona fide* Christian body.

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