

## CONFESSION AND CONFESSIONS

## I

What follows is an attempt to address some fundamental theological questions about the nature and function of creeds and confessions in the life of the church. Its basic positive claim is that creeds and confessional formulae properly emerge out of one of the primary and defining activities of the church, the *act of confession*. In that act, which is constantly to characterize the life of the church, the church binds itself to the gospel. Confession is the act of astonished, fearful and grateful acknowledgement that the gospel is the one word by which to live and die; in making its confession, the church lifts up its voice to do what it *must* do – speak with amazement of the goodness and truth of the gospel and the gospel's God. Creeds and confessional formulae exist to promote that act of confession: to goad the church towards it, to shape it, to tie it to the truth, and so to perpetuate the confessional life and activity of the Christian community. In this way, creeds and confessional formulae are the servants of the gospel in the church.

Alongside this positive claim run two polemical points. One – largely implicit – is that when the church tries to do without the offices of these servants of the gospel it endangers its relation to the gospel. In the same way that the church's life can be threatened by misrule, arbitrariness or pollution if it neglects canon, sacraments or order, so also it will be exposed to peril if it attempts to exist without the act of confession and its formalization in credal texts. The second polemical claim is that the creed is a good servant but a bad master: it assists, but cannot replace, the act of confession. The church, that is, cannot have the creed but somehow bypass the act of confession, for to do so is to convert the event of confession into an achieved formula, graspable without immediate reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit. Whatever else we may say by way of commending the place of the creed in the life of the church, we must

not promote the notion that the creed's significance is merely statutory. Creeds serve, but cannot of themselves comprise the totality of, what it means to be a confessing community.

Both the positive claim and its polemical corollaries rest on a conviction that we need a *theological* description of creeds and confessional formulae, that is, an account which talks about creeds by talking about God. The creeds must not be naturalized; that is, they must not be depicted merely immanently, as functions of the Christian religious community or tradition, naturally considered. Modern critical historical theology has offered a natural history of the creeds, presenting their development as a history of the church's absorption of cultural and philosophical convention, and as social tradition. In the case of giants like Baur or Harnack, such natural histories of the creeds had a fundamentally critical intent, demoting the creeds by offering an immanent explanation of their genesis, so that – like canon and order – they no longer encounter the church as it were from outside with a transcendent claim, but are simply an item in its domestic life. More recent attempts to depict the creeds as instruments of community self-description, identity-avowal, social differentiation or formation in virtue, while they are more alert to the religious functions of creeds, still run the risk of immanence. My suggestion, by contrast, is that what is required is not a more elaborate natural history, sociology or cultural geography of the creeds, but a dogmatic depiction. What is required, in other words, is an account of creeds which sees them as features in the landscape of the church, *theologically considered* as that reality of human history transfigured by the Spirit, visible to faith and therefore to be described spiritually. What is said about the nature and functions of creeds and confessions must be rooted in talk about the triune God in the economy of salvation, tracing these human texts back to their source in the church's participation in the drama of God's saving self-communication in Christ through the Spirit's power. This is not, of course, to cancel out the natural history of the creeds, any more than to talk of a canon of Holy Scripture is to cancel out the natural history of canonization. It is simply to say that the history of the creeds is part of the history of the church – part, that is, of that sphere of human life invaded and annexed by God, and characterized by astonished and chastened hearing of the Word, and by grateful and afflicted witness.

Before pressing the claim of the creed as the basis of a renewed ecumenical convergence around some sort of generous orthodoxy, therefore, it is crucial that we put in place a theological account of

the act of confession and its credal instruments. If we fail to do so, what we say will be in the wrong register, and we will fall victim to the shrill juridical and factional hostilities which so often afflict calls for renewed confessionalism. Confession is an act of the church, a spiritual act; and it is a matter, therefore, for theological description and judgement.

## II

To try to grasp what lies at the heart of the act of confession, we may ponder Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 9.13 concerning 'the obedience of your confession of the gospel of Christ'. What Paul has to say there forms part of the great flow of his celebration of the abundance of God. To God's abundance, God's open-handedness, there correspond two fundamental acts of the church: material generosity and confession of the gospel. Both acts are echoes of what Paul calls (v. 14) 'the surpassing grace of God in you'; both, that is, are brought into being by the limitless lavishness of God which Paul celebrates in the climactic words of the chapter: 'Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift' (v. 15). It is in this context – the celebration of God's overwhelming generosity – that I suggest we root our understanding of the church's act of confession. Before it is proposition or oath of allegiance, the confession of the church is a cry of acknowledgement of the unstoppable miracle of God's mercy. Confession, we might say by way of definition, is that event in which the speech of the church is arrested, grasped and transfigured by the self-giving presence of God. To confess is to cry out in acknowledgement of the sheer gratuity of what the gospel declares, that in and as the man Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit, God's glory is the glory of his self-giving, his radiant generosity. Very simply, to confess is to indicate 'the glory of Christ' (2 Cor. 8.23). This can be expanded in three directions.

First, *the act of confession originates in revelation*. This human act takes its rise in the divine act which is generative of the life of the church in its entirety: God's communicative self-presence, the gracious and saving self-communication of God the Lord. 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 in forgiveness, freedom from sin, and fellowship with God. Confession flows from this electing and life-giving self-manifestation. Confession is not primarily an act

of *definition*; it is, rather, a 'thankful, praising, self-committing acceptance of God's self-revelation in Christ'.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, this impulse lying behind the act of confession is, as Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 9, 'surpassing' and 'inexpressible'. It lies wholly beyond our intellectual or spiritual or moral reach; it is not one of the things which we can appropriate and assign a place in our world; in this matter, we are not competent. And because God's self-communication is thus permanently disorienting – because it is a movement of God, a gift which cannot be converted into a possession – confession is more a matter of *astonishment* than an attempt at closure.

Second, therefore, *the act of confession is a responsive, not a spontaneous act*. In Paul's terms, it is an act of *obedience*, a term which connects confession both to submission and to attentive listening. Obedient confession of the gospel of Christ is not first and foremost a proposal on the part of the church; it is an act *of* the church which follows upon an act done *to* the church. As Barth puts it, in making its confession in the *credo*, 'the church bows before that God Whom we did not seek and find – Who rather has sought and found us'.<sup>2</sup> Once again, therefore, 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 wills, effects and completes saving fellowship with himself: God alone is its origin, its accomplishment and its realization. And in a real sense, therefore, God alone is the origin, accomplishment and realization of the act of confession. 'Confessions cannot be made; they can only be received as a gift.'<sup>3</sup>

Third, accordingly, *the act of confession is an episode in the conflict between God and sin which is at the centre of the drama of salvation*. Confession is a counter-movement to human wickedness, a counter-movement brought about and sustained by the overflow of God's abundance. Sin is in part the refusal to confess – the sullen and hard-hearted refusal to acknowledge God's self-gift, failure to respond to God's lavishness by voicing God's praise. Confession refuses these refusals. It is a repentant act, a turning, and therefore a decisive 'No' to silence about God or to that murmuring against

1. O. Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 29.

2. K. Barth, *Credo* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936), p. 7.

3. E. Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), p. 16.

God which is the response of the wicked to God's generosity. Confession, therefore, is an aspect of the church's holiness. To be holy is to be elect, caught up in God's drastic negation of disorder and unrighteousness; and confession is the first work of the elect as they are separated by God for acknowledgement and praise of God.

In short: 'the Community confesses, and it "exists" in its confessing'.<sup>4</sup> The point of stressing this is to highlight how confession is *act* or *event* before it is *document*. Textual formulae are instruments of confession, but they do not in any way render the act of confession superfluous. This point is of considerable importance, not least because we are sometimes tempted to think that confessional formulae represent fixity, that they are a means of settling doctrinal disputes. In one sense, of course, confessional formulae do just that: they articulate dogmatic decisions, and so move the life of the church to a new stage which the church cannot repudiate or neglect without redrawing its identity. But the dogmatic decisions which the church articulates in confessional formulae cannot simply be thought of as capital in the bank. Confession is a permanently occurring event; the church never reaches a point where the act of obedient confession can be put behind it as something which *has been* made, and which can be replaced by a text which will become the icon of the church as a confessing community. Properly understood, a confessional formula does not put an end to the act of confession but attempts to ensure its persistence. A creed does not ensure the church's safety from interruption – quite the opposite: it exposes the church to the need for an unceasing renewal of confession of the gospel, of hearing, obedience and acknowledgement of that which the formula indicates.

### III

With this in mind, we turn to look more closely at the nature of the creeds and confessional formulae which emerge from the act of confession – at confession as *text*. In propositional form, my suggestion is this: *a creed or confessional formula is a public and binding indication of the gospel set before us in the scriptural witness, through which the church affirms its allegiance to God, repudiates the*

4. Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, vol. 1, p. 29.

*falsehood by which the church is threatened, and assembles around the judgement and consolation of the gospel.*

1. A creed or confessional formula is a *public and binding indication of the gospel*. A little more will be said about the 'binding' character of creeds later; for the present, I want to draw attention to their necessarily *public* character. 'A confession', says Barth, 'cannot be spoken *mezzo forte*.'<sup>5</sup> That is, a confession or creed is a proclamation, a publication or making known of that which is confessed. To confess is not to reflect, even to reflect theologically; it is to herald the gospel. A confessional formula, therefore, shares the vividness and directness of the act of confession by which it is generated. To confess is to testify and to testify with a bit of noise.

It is crucial, however, that we realize that this necessarily public character of a creed does not derive from the busy, authoritarian or loud personalities of the confessors. When that sort of brashness happens – as it often does when calls for a renewed confessionalism are issued – the creed becomes hopelessly distorted, because it is no longer the articulation of an act of confession but merely of pressure-group dynamics, of the desire not just to confess the gospel but to win. Unless that temptation is resisted, confession – however vigorous – will not be obedient confession of the gospel but simply brandishing a weapon in the church's face. The counter to the temptation is to build into the dynamics of the confession a deep sense of the transcendence of that which we confess. A creed is not a programme, a platform, a manifesto to mobilize our forces. It is an amazed cry of witness: 'Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (Jn 1.29). Confession is attestation, not self-assertion.

Because confession is public attestation, it is inseparable from conflict and affliction. To recite the creed is to enter into revolt against the world and against the church in so far as it has not yet left the world behind. Public confession challenges by setting the whole of the life of the church and the world beneath the judgement of the gospel. It therefore involves a denial of untruth, and a glad and courageous affirmation of truth. A confession which fails to do this – which is not *dangerous*, which does not venture to contradict – is not a confession worth making, but simply a domestic inventory of Christian attitudes. Real confession is closely linked to

martyrdom: both are testimony; both are attestations of the truth which evoke conflict and suppression. The suppression takes various forms: violence, counter-argument, indifference, liturgical routinization. But a church which confesses will demonstrate in its practical attitude a dogged resistance to such pressures. It will simply not conform, because it *cannot* conform. The church which confesses knows that it has been overwhelmed by the gospel and that part of being overwhelmed is publishing the name of Jesus. If once the church allows itself to be stifled in making that confession, it has put itself beyond martyrdom and therefore turned away from the lavishness of God. But if – with fear and trembling, with human uncertainty, with anxiety yet with courage – the church refuses to be arrested in making its confession, then it says in public the one word which slays the devil.

2. Second, a creed or confessional formula is *an indication of the gospel set before us in the scriptural witness*. A written confession is a testimony, pointing to that which is other than itself. What the confession attests is not, first and foremost, 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. The gospel is normatively set forth in Holy Scripture, for Holy Scripture is that collection of writings generated by and appointed to serve the self-communication of God. Because it is in this way a 'means of grace', an instrument through which God acts to lay bare the gospel, Holy Scripture is prior and superior to all acts of confession, and all acts of confession are subordinate to Holy Scripture. A confession always thinks 'from below'<sup>6</sup>; only by virtue of this subordination does it have any claim on the life of the church. Creeds and confessions have no freestanding existence; they are not a replacement for, supplementation of, or improvement upon, Holy Scripture; they are not even a non-negotiable, normative 'reading' of Scripture. Creeds and confessions are wholly a function of the Word of God which is given in Scripture as through the power of the Spirit the risen Jesus testifies to himself. The rule, therefore, is this: 'Scripture remains Scripture, unique, incommensurable, outside the series'.<sup>7</sup> Hence the authority of the creed is inseparable from

5. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), p. 639.

6. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, p. 39.

7. K. Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions* (Louisville: WJKP, 2002), p. 20.

its 'expository dependence on Holy Writ'.<sup>8</sup> Its claim is the claim of an anatomy of divinity, a brief outline of the biblical gospel. Its task is to enable the church's reading of Holy Scripture. We may think of the creed as an aspect of the church's exegetical fellowship, of learning alongside the saints and doctors and martyrs how to give ear to the gospel. But such fellowship is fellowship in a *task* which is also ours now. The creed is not a substitute for the church's reading of Scripture, a sort of achieved exegetical steady state. It is, rather, the exemplary instance of the church's submission of all aspects of its life to the prophetic and apostolic witness. It may guide and chasten and correct our reading, but it cannot absolve us of responsibility in the present. The creed does not mean the *end* of one of the church's chief occupations, which is hearing the gospel through attention to Holy Scripture. Hearing the Word is not an inheritance but an event: creeds and confessions structure and guide that hearing, but they do not make it dispensable. Nor, in one sense, do they make hearing *easier*. Truly attending to the creed means not finding safe water but entering into the disruption which is the inevitable accompaniment of encountering the gospel of God.

3. Third, a creed or confessional formula is *one of the means through which the church affirms its allegiance to God*. Confession – like praise, proclamation, holiness and service – is a human echo of the electing mercy of God. To confess is to take sides, to pledge involvement with a particular cause, by binding oneself to a particular reading of reality. To confess in the words of a credal formula is to acknowledge that there are times in the life of the church when indifference, irony, hesitation or scruple are false spiritual stances, and that the church's relation to the truth requires the adoption of a position and the publication of that position in an act of loyalty. Not every moment in the life of the church demands such acts; but some do. Some occasions – not necessarily those which affect our own immediate interests – require an affirmation of allegiance, which ties those who make it to certain options, which excludes others, and which governs the thought and speech of the church's members.

To confess in this way is a counter-cultural move, and we should not underestimate the extent to which, in acting in this way and affirming its allegiance, the church goes against the grain of some

8. Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, p. 12.

deep-seated modern instincts. Those instincts are exquisitely described by Kant in the remarkable treatment of conscience in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*.<sup>9</sup> Kant fears that public assent to a confessional statement always undermines real integrity and loyalty, because profession is mere external conformity, simulated conviction and not the disposition of a free conscience. Kant is quite right, of course, to protest against the deceit which accompanies the enforcement of a confession. But the mistake here is an assumption which Kant shares with modern liberal Christianity: the assumption that confession is always bad faith. And – again like modern liberal Christianity – Kant's remedy for bad faith is *conscience* – but conscience transformed so that it is a function of will and judgement, not of given truth. If Kant and his modern Christian heirs can make little sense of a confessional formula as an act of allegiance, it is because of a deep commitment to a picture of the human self as free only when undetermined, and as fruitful only when engaged in critical inquiry.

But an act of allegiance expressed through a confessional formula is not an act of self-determination but of acknowledgement. It is an act whose origins lie not in the will but in the self-presenting, lovingly coercive reality of the gospel. It is an act which involves *trust* – trust in our mothers and fathers in the faith then, and in our sisters and brothers in the faith now. And it is an act of obedient acquiescence rather than of critical appraisal – an act, we might even say, of judgement broken by the truth rather than of enthroned reason. Confessing the creed means leaving behind the omniscience of conscience and rationality.

All of that is by way of stressing that the creed is an act of allegiance. Once again, it is very important not to overinvest in the human dynamics of profession. The centre of gravity must not become the personal authenticity of the act of allegiance made in assenting to a formula. This is partly to make sure that we do not create a nastily suspicious culture in the church, because if we do so we will oppose the gospel. But it is also because the *fides quae* – those things which are believed – have priority over the *fides qua* – the act of belief by which they are believed. We would be very unwise indeed to defend orthodoxy by attacking the sincerity of

9. I. Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, in A. W. Wood and G. di Giovanni (eds), *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 202–6.

those in the church who appear to deny or compromise their profession. What is wrong with false professors is not just that they have broken their oath but that they have denied the truth.

4. Fourth, through a publicly affirmed creed or confessional formula *the church repudiates the falsehood by which it is threatened*. In a creed the church says 'Yes' to truth, and in saying 'Yes' it thereby also says 'No' to falsehood. It says 'No' only because it first says 'Yes', and it says 'No' with fear and trembling, only because it *must* do so. Nevertheless, in affirming the church also denies, turning from its own complicity in falsehood and striding repentantly and hopefully towards the truth.

This means, first, that – as Bonhoeffer put it – 'the concept of heresy belongs necessarily and irrevocably with the concept of a credal confession'.<sup>10</sup> What is so grievous about the loss of an operative notion of heresy is that it is symptomatic of the loss of an operative notion of truth. Once voluntarism and nominalism grasp hold of the church – once, that is, the Christian faith is no longer considered an onslaught on idolatry but a fertile opportunity for its exercise – then the notion of heresy atrophies and eventually falls away. Very simply, this must not happen, and one of the ways of ensuring that it does not happen is by serious attention to the confessional life of the church.

A confession is a move against falsehood, whether in the form of error or of indifference. A confession worthy of the name will – implicitly or explicitly – include an anathema, an assertion that a teaching or practice is outside the church. We should therefore not be too ready to concede to critics of the confessional attitude that the notion of heresy and the practice of anathematizing are intrinsically flawed, inseparable from the dynamics of scapegoating, exclusion and diminishment of that which is other than the norm. Certainly it is irrefutable that 'orthodoxy' is a political practice as well as a theological concept; certainly an orthodox doctrine is often a successful doctrine; certainly the orthodox have always shown an unwholesome appetite for depicting their opponents in the worst possible light. But to use the notion of heresy in such ways is to abuse it – to deploy it as a means of creating an unpolluted church with a watertight skin. For truth is not a culture or a political practice or a structure for discipline, however much those

10. D. Bonhoeffer, *Christology* (London: Collins, 1978), p. 75.

things may serve the truth. Truth is a miracle; truth is the creation of the Holy Spirit. The notion of heresy and the practice of anathematizing are ways of following or being caught up in the miracle of truth. They are spiritual practices, aspects of the transformation of human knowledge and government by the coming of the Word of God.

5. So far, then, it has been suggested that a creed is a public and binding indication of the gospel as set out in Holy Scripture, through which the church affirms its allegiance to God and repudiates falsehood. In doing these things, a creed is, finally, *a means through which the church assembles around the judgement and consolation of the gospel*. We may ask: What happens when the Christian community professes its faith by reciting the creed? If it is to be of any spiritual worth, such an act must be more than a cheerful or even solemn repetition of a safe formula. A creed places the church under judgement. In the paragraph from *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* to which reference has already been made, Kant says this:

Let the author of a creed or the teacher of a church, indeed, let every human being, so far as he inwardly stands by the conviction that certain propositions are divinely revealed, ask himself: Do you really dare to avow the truth of these propositions in the sight of him who scrutinizes the heart, and at the risk of relinquishing all that is valuable and holy to you?

And he adds, 'I would have to have a very unfavourable conception of human nature . . . not to suppose that even the boldest teacher of the faith must quake at the question'.<sup>11</sup> And Kant is right – if the creed does not make us quake, if it is not recited with fear and trembling and penitence, then it is not recited with an eye to the one who scrutinizes the heart.

In fear and trembling we place ourselves beneath the truth which we confess. And in so doing we come to know that truth as endless consolation. The consolation which the gospel brings is its announcement that the world really is a place where God in Christ reigns with the unleashed power of the Holy Spirit; where faith, hope and love are *truthful* because they are in accordance with the way the world is. The church's task is to live out the new order which has been made at the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and

11. Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, pp. 205f.

so to turn its back on the old order of sin and death. That kind of energetic counter-practice requires that the church be committed to a fierce realism; it needs a deep conviction that the church can refuse the conventions of sin because they are a sham. And not the least of the functions of credal formulae is to lodge that kind of realism in the church's heart. The world is the place in which it is a truthful and joyful thing to confess that God is the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; that there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, who is one in being with the Father; that for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; that the Holy Spirit is Lord and life-giver. To confess these things is to confess the gospel's consolation and so to sponsor cheerful and confident practice on the basis of the gospel's announcement that God has once and for all put an end to the pretence of wickedness.

#### IV

We return to the question of the *binding* character of creeds and confessional formulae. What authority do these texts have in the church? In what way do they stand as a norm of teaching and practice?

Very simply: they have the authority of a norm which is itself normed; they have real yet conditional, limited and subordinate authority to bind the church; they are a penultimate but not an ultimate word. Creeds and confessional formulae have authority, but only in a twofold subordination. They are subordinate, first and foremost, to the fact that the God of the gospel is free transcendent presence and not merely the immanent soul of the church. God is present as Jesus Christ is present – the one risen from the dead, the one who has been lifted from our sight at the ascension; God is present as the Holy Spirit is present – the one who *comes* to us but is not a principle of immanence. The creed cannot replace God's presence; it can only reach after it, and identify where that presence gives itself to us. Second, creeds and confessional formulae are subordinate, as we have seen, to Holy Scripture, for it is Scripture, not creed, which is appointed by God as the instrument of his self-communication. Whatever else we may say of the creed, therefore, we have to say that it is a *normed* norm. This emphatically does not give us any excuse to fall into soft relativism. To say that the creed is conditional or penultimate is worlds apart from the idea that the creed is merely one not very good attempt at pinning down a God

whom we cannot really know. The creed is *confident* of its object; it *knows* this God. To talk of the provisionality of the creed is not an expression of scepticism; it is not the antithesis of earnestness; it is not an attempt to undermine genuine confession. It is simply a sober consequence of the fact that sinners – even redeemed sinners – cannot comprehend God's revelation. It simply acknowledges the constantly self-reforming character of the church's thought and speech. Reformation is needed, not in order to keep step with the world – why on earth would we want to do that? – but in order to make sure that we are properly out of step with the world and therefore trying to keep pace with God. Once again, this is not a matter of promoting instability, having everything open to revision all the time: such an attitude risks denying the reality of the gift of the Spirit to the church. All we are saying is that the creed is not God's Word, but ours; made, not begotten.

On this basis, we can approach the question of the juridical structures which surround the creed: in what way is it *legally* binding on its subscribers? Church law is an aspect of the church's visibility; that is, its life as a human historical society. Law is one of the instruments through which the Holy Spirit ensures the orderly shape and regularity of the church's existence in space and time. It is scarcely possible to conceive of any kind of enduring ecclesial reality without legal instruments for the maintenance of its common life, and confessional formulae are clearly part of the statutory life of the community. Creeds need a legal framework of subscription and assent. Creeds without subscription are hardly likely to serve the church's life in the gospel, and run the risk of becoming what Anglicans sometimes call 'historic formularies' – by which they often mean charming curios which can be safely tucked away at the back of the prayer book.

Creeds need a legal framework. But there is an important qualification here: the juridical and statutory have only instrumental significance. We are sometimes impatient with the transcendence of the object of our confession, and tempted to manage it through law. But church law is not domestication; it safeguards, but it does not codify, the free self-presence of the church's Lord and his testimony to himself in Scripture. In short – the authority of the creed, its power to bind, is not primarily positive and juridical but spiritual.

This means that a confession binds in so far as it is in agreement with Holy Scripture: it binds by saying 'Scripture says'. As with all instruments of the church's order, the authority of the creed is

inseparable from its submission to the Word of God; it has the authority of the herald, not the magistrate.

On the one hand, this means that we should not use the confessions of the church to press the church to take on the wrong sort of visibility – a purely ‘natural’ visibility in which the church is identified too closely with its visible forms. When this happens, and a credal formula becomes the article by which the church stands or falls, then the transcendent, eschatological reference of the visible church is compromised, and confessions come to embody, not testify to, the gospel. But when the church becomes properly visible through its confessions, it does not leave behind Spirit, faith, the hiddenness and freedom of God; it does not convert the drama of redemption into a set of propositions to be policed. *Confessional* visibility is *spiritual* visibility. On the other hand, there is the wrong sort of *invisibility*. We can, for example, so emphasize the incomprehensibility of the object of confession that formulae are simply ruled out from the beginning. Or we can, as many moderns do, treat confessional formulae as merely the external dress of inner conviction and experience – and we prefer our church naked. Both rob the church of its proper visibility; both make oversight of the church’s public life acutely difficult; both risk undermining the church’s relation to the truth of the gospel.

In sum: creeds bind because and only because the gospel binds. And hence we have to say (1) that the gospel does bind, and that confessions are a place where we encounter the obligatory force of the truth; and (2) that the statutory claim of the creed binds only as it presents the gospel’s claim. Figuring out a practice to express these principles is no easy matter. The common options – either libertinism or authoritarianism – are not open to a church with any sense for the gospel. What is required more than anything else is the discernment and prudence which are the gifts of the Spirit, and so matters not of policy but of prayer.

## V

We sum up these reflections by noting how the credal life of the church expresses each of the four marks of the church: its unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. The creed points to the unity of the church, not in mere fellow-feeling but in the given realities of one Lord, one Spirit, one God and Father of all. It points to the holiness of the church because it is a confession of election – of the

drastic separation between the church and sin which the mercy of God opens up and which the mind of the church must honour. It points to the catholicity of the church because to profess the creed is not to set up a party banner but to read the gospel in the fellowship of the saints. It points to the apostolicity of the church because it is only in confession of the truth that the church can live out the faith and mission of the apostles.

We should be under no illusion that renewed emphasis upon the creed will in and of itself renew the life of the church: it will not. The church is created and renewed through Word and Spirit. Everything else – love of the brethren, holiness, proclamation, confession – is dependent upon them. Yet it is scarcely possible to envisage substantial renewal of the life of the church without renewal of its confessional life. There are many conditions for such renewal. One is real governance of the church’s practice and decision-making not by ill-digested cultural analysis but by reference to the credal rendering of the biblical gospel. Another is recovery of the kind of theology which sees itself as an apostolic task, and does not believe itself entitled or competent to reinvent or subvert the Christian tradition. A third, rarely noticed, condition is the need for a recovery of symbolics (the study of creeds and confessions) as part of the theological curriculum – so much more edifying than most of what fills the seminary day. But alongside these are required habits of mind and heart: love of the gospel, docility in face of our forebears, readiness for responsibility and venture, a freedom from concern for reputation, a proper self-distrust. None of these things can be cultivated; they are the Spirit’s gifts, and the Spirit alone must do his work. What we may do – and must do – is cry to God, who alone works great marvels.