

**Theology for Life**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church**  
Lesson 4: The Aid of Confessions and Tradition

**Last time:** *God's Word is sufficient for life and godliness. His Word should exercise authority in our life. Our conscience is free from the guilt of sin in things the Bible does not call sin.*

What *exactly* does God inspire?

- a) The historical events that happened in the Bible
- b) Our reading of the Bible
- c) The authors of the books of the Bible
- d) The words of the Bible

**Skepticism About Confessions or Tradition**

Many churches will boast that they have "no creed but Christ." Behind this statement is the concern that tradition can obscure truth and creeds can place authority in something other than God's Word.

What are some valid reasons to be skeptical of appeals to tradition? What might be some dangers in operating without a creed?

Evangelical Christianity, in particular, rejects creeds in place of individual interpretation and personal experience.

*The revivalist of the Second Great Awakening... argued (as the secularists had a century earlier) that God's revelation was not properly mediated by either tradition or theology; it came directly to each individual through personal experience. As a result, the individual became the arbiter of what the Bible did and did not say. The new evangelical coalition attached little importance to the aid of the past or even the present community of interpreters in matters of biblical interpretation. External authorities were jettisoned and divine authority was internalized-- a strategy not altogether different from that of the Enlightenment.* Rick Lints

Nathan Hatch in "Evangelicalism as a Democratic Movement" puts it this way:

*In America the principal mediator of God's voice has not been state, church, council, confession, ethnic group, university college or seminary; it has been quite simply, the people... the impulse to rework Christianity into forms that were unmistakably popular... and democratic in at least three respects: it was audience centered, intellectually open to all, and organizationally pluralistic and innovative.*

What are some dangers of populist Christianity?

Is there really "no creed but Christ"?

*"Christians are not divided between those who have creeds and confessions and those who do not; rather, they are divided between those who have public creeds and confessions that are written down and exist as public documents, subject to public scrutiny, evaluation, and critique, and those who have private creeds and confessions that are often improvised, unwritten, and thus not open to public scrutiny, not susceptible to evaluation and crucially and ironically, not, therefore, subject to testing by Scripture to see whether they are true."* Carl Trueman

Scripture alone is our only perfect rule for faith and practice. Most churches affirm this, but never explain what they understand the scriptures to teach. Our church recognizes the great value of creeds and confessions for summarizing the teaching of scripture.

We affirm that the historic creeds like the *Apostles' Creed* faithfully represent the essential beliefs in scripture. We also affirm that the *Westminster Confession of Faith* is a reliable testimony of the Bible's teachings.

The ultimate goal of a confession is to preserve biblical faith, not supplant it. The *Westminster Confession* itself affirms this:

*WCF I.9. The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.*

*I.10. The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.*

A confession must never come between the Bible and the Christian. The Bible doesn't need a mediator to tell us what it says. The Reformation challenged that principle of Catholicism.

Catholicism: Bible → Tradition → Christian

Or, Revelation → Tradition → Knowing God and Believing

But, we also recognize the danger in private interpretations that have a way of manipulating God's word to say what we want it to say. Most, if not all, heresies in the church begin by well-meaning Christians attempting to defend the faith and arguing from scripture.

The Confession is a good servant but a bad master: it assists, but cannot replace, the act of confession.

John Webster puts it this way:

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

So rather than standing between God's revelation and our knowing God, a confession is our articulation of what we believe God is saying.

In our illustration, confessions belong on "Our Part" not on "God's Part."

**God's Part:** Revealing Himself (making himself known in Nature and Scripture)



**Our Part:** Knowing God (Confession of Faith)

Webster says, “Confession is not primarily an act of definition; it is, rather, a ‘thankful, praising, self-committing acceptance of God’s self-revelation in Christ.’”

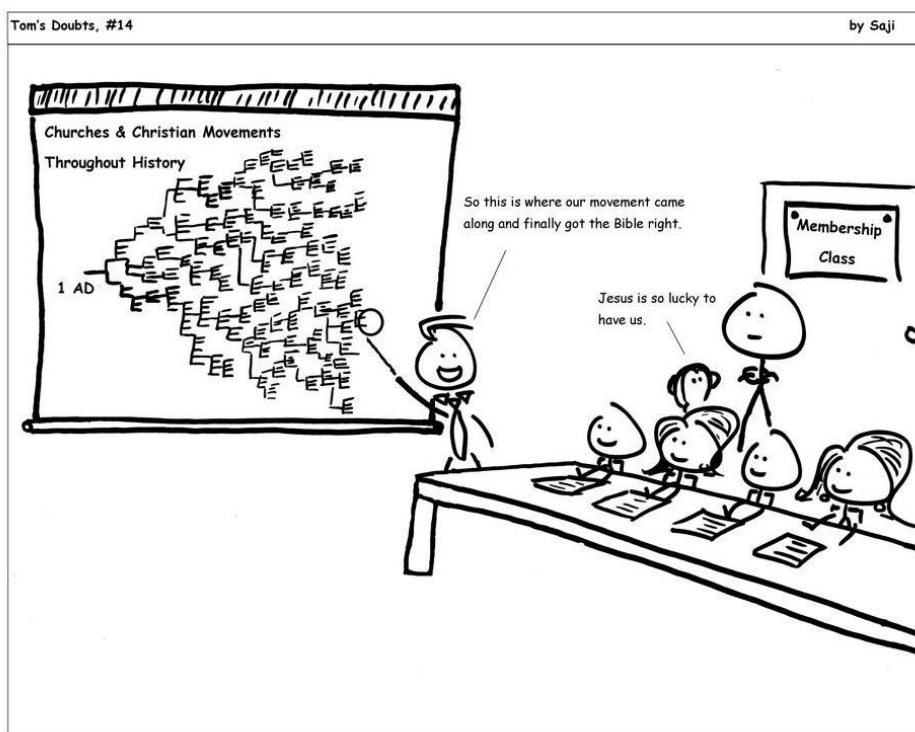
Reading scripture with our Confession can guide us and confirm our reading (letting us know we are on the right track) or it can expose mis-readings that need correcting.

Should Christians value unique and innovative readings of scripture or value interpretation that fits with what Christians in previous generations have said?

### **Why use the *Westminster Confession of Faith*?**

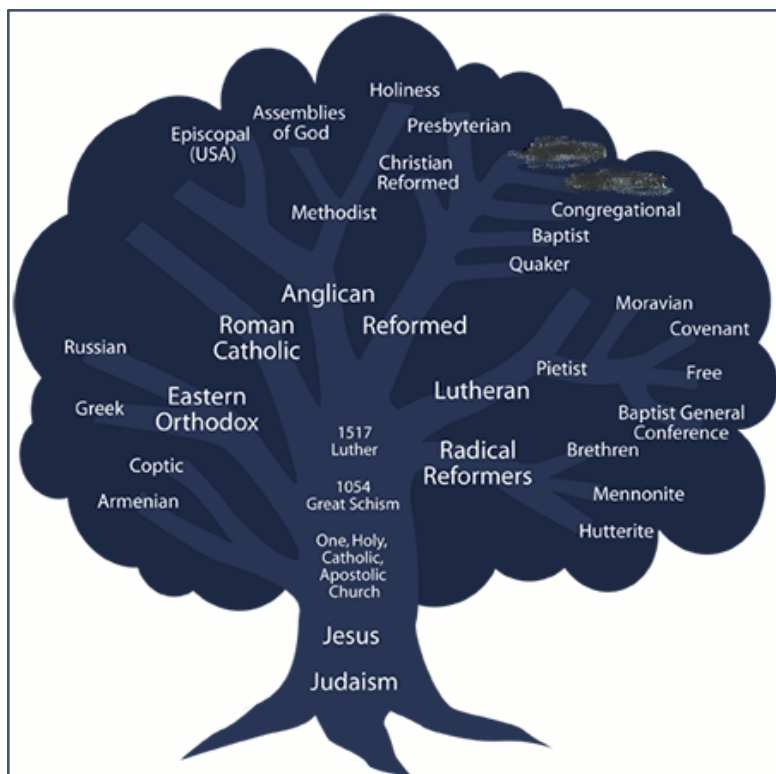
Why use a document that was created in England in the 1630s? Carl Trueman writes, no one today would “consult a seventeenth-century textbook on surgery to find out how to remove a burst appendix.”

Westminster represents a particular branch of our spiritual family tree.



The major “ecumenical creeds” of the first four centuries set the “trunk” of the tree and determined what all Christians believe (against what can no longer be called Christian).

There are major breakpoints that are represented in this confession without getting too narrow. Here are some key turning points.



Each major branch of the tree sets the smaller branches on a trajectory that determine the subsequent beliefs. We shouldn't underestimate the vast core beliefs that we all share, illustrated above by the trunk of the tree. Most of the points in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* represent beliefs held in common with all Christians everywhere.

Focusing in on the specifics, Westminster follows the breakpoints of:

- Western Christianity (against Eastern Orthodoxy),
- Protestant (against Roman Catholicism),
- Reformed (against Lutheran and Radical Reformers),
- Reformed (against Anglican)
- Sacramental (against Baptist)

Westminster doesn't go further. It can be held by Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Christian Reformed, etc.

How can we make sure this class reaches its goal of knowing God? What ways can we get sidetracked from that goal?

### **Connecting the Dots: Where Theology meets Life**

*Summary: The Holy Spirit has worked in Christians throughout the centuries to help shed light on the correct interpretation of Scripture. Creeds and Confessions help us steer clear of errors we would make as individual interpreters.*

- How can using Creeds and Confessions help you prepare a Bible study or Sunday school lesson? How can they help answer difficult questions?
- What habits can you develop to help you incorporate Confessions more into your understanding of Christianity?