Why do we have a declaration of belief?

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The present article reflects its origin as a paper designed, especially, to help students grapple with the importance of subscribing to the UCCF Doctrinal Basis . . . it has, however, far wider implications!

Since the very earliest days of the church, Christians have written summaries of their belief for themselves. Some small summary confessions of faith can be found within the Bible itself (for example, 1 Timothy 3:16). Then, the early post-apostolic church produced definitive statements of essential Christian belief, such as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, that are still considered benchmarks of orthodoxy.

Hundreds of years later, Christians were still producing confessions of their faith: in 1530, the Augsburg Confession of Lutheran belief; in 1562, the Thirty-Nine Articles, defining the faith of the Church of England; in 1646, the Westminster Confession of Faith; in 1689, the Baptist Confession of Faith, etc. UCCF's Doctrinal Basis belongs to that long tradition.

Why we do not like confessions

For all their defining importance in Christian history, confessions of faith have always been received with mixed reactions. Perhaps the most popular presenting reason for this is that they can be read as if they replace all desire for a Spirit-filled life and a vital relationship with God with a desiccated list of doctrine. That is, that they replace the Spirit with the letter, leaving only dead dull orthodoxy behind. However, to understand confessions in that way is to mistake the recipe for the pudding. Confessions, like recipes, are mere descriptions of the vital ingredients of the Christian life of faith, not to be confused with the reality itself. Yet that does not mean that the description is unimportant: different ingredients will mean a different pudding.

There is, however, a more deeply-rooted and sinister reason for our distrust of confessions. It stems from the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve refused to listen to what God had said. Ever since then, mankind has sought to pretend that God has not spoken to us. Naturally, we do not wish to acknowledge that God has spoken to us, for that would admit our disobedience to what he has said; it would be a confession that we are not the lords and gods we daily pretend to be. An excellent way to sustain the pretence is to remain vague, and refuse to be specific about matters of theology. By maintaining that we can do no more there than speculate in the dark, we build around ourselves the protective assumption that God has not spoken his revealing light to us. There in the shadows, undisturbed by the harsh light of divine revelation, we are free to fashion our gods to our hearts' content; we can make a religion that is no more than comforting experience, moralism, or whatever we choose.

History bears ample testimony to this natural tendency of ours. In seventeenth-century England, for example, a group of theologians called latitudinarians, tired of the never-ending theological debates that the Reformation had caused, sought a Christianity shorn of most of its doctrine. 'Doctrine' itself became a dirty word. For them, Christianity was essentially morality, and the less doctrine it had, the more people could agree and unite. (The argument had a point: people would then unite. The problem was, they would unite around standards of behaviour, not Christ.)

In many ways the latitudinarians were the heralds of the kind of eighteenth-century Enlightenment scepticism towards all doctrine epitomised by Edward Gibbon. In his monumental *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Gibbon looks despairingly at the doctrinal disputes of the early post-apostolic church as nothing but irrelevant bickering. The Arian controversy, for example, over whether Christ is actually God (or 'homoousios' – of the same nature – with the Father) or merely an exalted creature ('homoiousios' – of a similar nature – with the Father), he dismissed in one line: 'the difference between the Homoousion and the Homoiousion is almost invisible to the nicest theological eye'.[1] For Gibbon, it was an immaterial debate over the single letter 'i'. Yet the controversy was about whether Christ is God, whether he is to be worshipped or not. There was more than all the world of difference between the two sides: one saw Christ as Creator, the other saw him as nothing but a created being. Gibbon's blithe indifference to doctrine could just as well argue that the difference between Christianity and Islam is merely one of numbers: one (Allah) or three (Father, Son, Spirit).

New heights of vagueness were reached in the nineteenth century, especially by the prince of German high liberalism, Adolf von Harnack. Having removed all confidence in the reality of God's objective revelation, Harnack espoused a doctrinally stripped-down Christianity that entailed little more than the universal Fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man.

In a confession, we: acknowledge that God has spoken

With our natural inclinations and so much of the mainstream of western intellectual history stacked against it, it is no wonder that the confession of faith has become an unthinkable offence. To detail specifics of what God has revealed, treating them as objective truths and not mere subjective

sentiments, cuts at the very nerve of modern culture. Yet that is precisely the intent of a confession. A confession of faith, such as the Doctrinal Basis, is a refusal to go along with the pretence that God has not spoken to us. In a confession we confess that God has spoken, and has spoken clearly and specifically. Thus we humble ourselves, admitting that we are not, as we would wish, the final arbiters of truth, but that absolute, non-negotiable truth has been given to us. Confession is our act of obedient response to what God has spoken. It is an acknowledgement that God is God, and that we are not the deciders of truth.

This is especially the case when a confession articulates something we would not otherwise believe, something counter-cultural and therefore controversial. Then we can be sure that this is not truth of our own invention that we are confessing. It could also indicate the importance of the doctrine being confessed. J. Gresham Machen once wrote:

> In the sphere of religion, as in other spheres, the things about which men are agreed are apt to be the things that are least worth holding; the really important things are the things about which men will fight.[2]

It could not be otherwise for Christianity, given that the essentials of Christian belief are not sentiments we can happily differ over, but matters of objective and historical truth.

When the world encounters a Christian confession of faith, it is entirely incapable of understanding what it sees, because in a confession it is confronted with a witness to a divine revelation from beyond this world. As such, the world sees the confession only as a tyrannical jailer for the human mind, constricting thought with its dictation of what is true and what false. Such is the only possible conclusion for a mind that seeks freedom from God's word. If, however, the gospel-claim is true that freedom can be found only through God's word, then, far from being a jailer, the confession is witness to a Liberator. Being a witness to the freedom-giving word of God, the Christian confession exists to aid the true work of the Spirit.

At this point we need to avoid two confusions. First, a confession is not an extension of scripture, as if it were God's word itself. It is a human response to God's word, an acknowledgement that he has spoken. As such, a confession is to be believed only in so far as it is faithful to scripture. But, as far as it does confess accurately the truth of scripture, it is to be assented to whole-heartedly as a confession of God's own truth.

Second, no confession has the ambition of presenting in itself the whole counsel of God or the full compass of everything its confessors believe. As a response to God's word, the confession exists to point and serve as a guide to the whole truth found in the scriptures. The confession, by its very nature, points beyond itself. Therefore, to think that a confession will constrain growth in the knowledge of God and his gospel is simply to misunderstand the intention of a confession. Confessions are not self-sufficient doctrinal cages, but guides, witnesses and safety nets.

In particular, confessions seek to lay out those beliefs that are necessary to be held by all concerned. They remain silent on matters that are of secondary importance, or that are not relevant to their own particular confession. Thus, for example, for the Baptist Confession of Faith it is necessary to mention the mode and subjects of baptism. For other confessions, such details would not usually be required. By such selection, confessions can promote 'unity in essentials, liberty in non-essentials, charity in all things'.[3]

In a confession, we: unite together under the gospel

Having first acknowledged that God has spoken clearly and specifically, the next thing a confession does is to bind our allegiance to what God has said. John Webster, Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Aberdeen, puts it like this:

> a creed or confessional formula is a public and binding indication of the gospel that is 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.[4]

Thus a confession is more than an attempt at obedient response to God's word; it is an attempt to ensure ongoing obedient response. Written confessions arise out of an awareness that we are fickle people. We naturally stray from what God has said in order to follow the siren voices of our imagination and our culture. If we wish to remain loyal to the gospel, we must therefore bind ourselves to it. This is the next purpose of a confession, to fasten its confessors to the gospel so that they keep on confessing it, and are not moved, unawares, to start confessing something else. As we commit ourselves to a confession, we nail our colours to its mast, and so define ourselves publicly by that allegiance. If we had not done so, it would be much easier to shift our allegiance without even noticing we had done so. Yet having once tied ourselves to a confession, it becomes significantly harder to change our minds over the fundamental matters of the confession, for we know it must involve a real change of identity.

This protection is further strengthened by the fact that a confession not only binds us to the gospel, it also binds fellow-confessors together. The act of confession is not only a public act; it is a corporate act. It is together that we confess (con- being a Latin prefix meaning 'together'). Thus we find that we are bound together in fellowship under the gospel. Through confession, the gospel becomes our common ground and shared vision.

In a confession, we: take a side

Once we have adopted a confession as the manifesto of our allegiance, we find that it begins to shape our perspective. Not only does it show where we might be tempted to leave the gospel or compromise it; it shows us where we need to act, and what we need to proclaim. It orders our values and priorities.

More strongly than that, however, it ushers us into the mighty conflict between the gospel and all that is opposed to it, both within ourselves and without. John Webster again:

> 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 insofar 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 judgment of the gospel. It therefore involves a denial of untruth and a glad and courageous affirmation of truth. A confession that fails to do this – that is not dangerous, that does not venture to contradict – is not a confession worth making, but simply a domestic inventory of Christian attitudes. Real confession is linked to martyrdom: both are testimony and attestations of the truth that evokes conflict and suppression.[5]

Given the extraordinary doctrinal retreat of the church in the face of an increasingly aggressive culture, it would seem that now, more than ever, we need confessions. Specifically, if God's people are to remain loyal to what God has said, we need confessions that dare to take a stand. Thus a real confession, if it is to acknowledge such a thing as truth with any authenticity, must acknowledge such a thing as falsehood. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote that 'the concept of heresy belongs necessarily and irrevocably with the concept of a creedal confession'.[6] It must be so, for when the notion of heresy seems anachronistic, so must the notion of truth.

This leads us to see that confessions of faith are never neutral or abstract. They are spoken into specific situations, addressing particular issues, such that loyalty to them must involve an active rejection of the heresies they condemn. This is why it is not possible for Christians today simply to confess the Apostles' or Nicene Creeds alone. Even they were responding to theological issues of the day. The fourth-century Nicene Creed, for example, was responding specifically to the Arian heresy mentioned above. That is not to say that the ancient creeds no longer have any validity. They maintain all their validity. However, one cannot simply turn back the clock. New theological issues and errors have arisen since then, requiring new confessions that deal with them.

UCCF's Doctrinal Basis is a confession for today, announcing mere Christian orthodoxy to our generation. It does not seek to narrow the bounds to define contentious issues such as election, baptism, eschatology, etc. Rather, as the Nicene Creed had a particular eye to a correct view of the person of Christ, so the Doctrinal Basis has, amongst other concerns, a particular eye to a correct view of the work of Christ on the cross, and to the authority of his word, the scriptures, doctrines that are especially under threat today.

Christian integrity

It is not the normal function of a confession of faith to spell out expectations of behaviour. A confession is, after all, a testimony to the faith, not a testimony to our response. To an age that sees doctrine as a cerebral nicety, this inevitably makes the confession look somewhat irrelevant to 'real life'. Yet the very existence of the confession testifies that here is truth that demands a response. A confession therefore demands that we have the integrity to respond appropriately to the truth being confessed. In this way the doctrine becomes profoundly life-shaping. For example, to confess with integrity that Jesus is Lord, and that the Spirit works in us to make us Christlike, means rejecting sin and altering every aspect of our lives.

By demanding such integrity from us, confessions forbid us to be nominal in our assent. Thus to sign the Doctrinal Basis but then ignore its doctrines and their entailments is simple deceit. For instance, were a speaker to condone, or indulge in, sexual activity outside of marriage, that would violate the DB's assertion that the Bible is the supreme authority in all matters of belief and behaviour, for the Bible is clear on that issue. Likewise, if a speaker were consistently failing to mention God's wrath and his just condemnation of sinful humanity, he would be failing to adhere to what the DB describes as a fundamental truth of Christianity. This delineation of teaching and practice works just as much with what the DB does not teach. A speaker might have a strong belief in a particular understanding of the extent of the atonement, for example; however, if he were to insist on that understanding as essential for all members of the Fellowship, he would be violating the DB just as much as the others.

In sum, the DB, as a confession, draws us, body and soul, into obedience to God's word. Through it we reject our natural rejection of revelation; we are led to know the gospel with ever-greater clarity; we ally ourselves with the gospel and there find unity; we defy and deny what it opposes; we shape our lives, thoughts, ministries and teaching. God has spoken! We confess it. To him alone be the glory.

Notes

1 Gibbon, E., *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Random House), vol 1, ch. xxi, n.155.

2 Machen, J. G., *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1923), 1-2.

3 Usually attributed to Augustine, but in fact probably penned by Peter Meiderlin, a seventeenth-century Lutheran theologian. John Calvin wrote on this distinction between doctrines of primary and secondary importance: 'For not all the articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as the proper principles of religion. Such are: God is one, Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God's mercy; and the like. Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of faith. Suppose that one church believes – short of unbridled contention and opinionated stubbornness – that souls upon leaving bodies fly to heaven; while another, not daring to define the place, is convinced nevertheless that they live to the Lord. What churches would disagree on this one point? Here are the apostle's words: "Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, be of the same mind; and if you be differently minded in anything, God shall reveal this also to you" [Phil. 3:15]. Does this not sufficiently indicate that a difference of opinion over these nonessential matters should in no wise be the basis of schism among Christians? First and foremost, we should agree on all points. But since all men are somewhat beclouded with ignorance, either we must leave no church remaining, or we must condone delusion in those matters which can go unknown without harm to the sum of religion and without loss of salvation. But here I would not support even the slightest errors with the thought of fostering them through flattery and connivance. But I say we must not thoughtlessly forsake the church because of any petty dissensions' (Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.12).

4 Webster, J., 'Confession and Confessions' in *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism*, ed. C. R. Seitz (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001), 123.
5 Webster, 124.
6 Bonhoeffer, D., *Christology* (London: Collins, 1978), 75.

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