Pulpit & People

Essays in honour of William Still on his 75th birthday

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CONCERNING CONFESSIONS

FRANCIS LYALL

I owe much to William Still, both spiritually and otherwise. He has been my minister for now some twenty-eight years, and it is a pleasure to join with the other contributors in this celebration of him. It is a mark of the man and the influence of his ministry that we come from such a variety of backgrounds and disciplines, though naturally there is some bias to the theological in our ranks. Were that bias missing one would have grounds for inquiry.

The topic here mused upon bridges from my own discipline of Law to that of Theology. What follows seeks not to reopen recent discussion, nor any wounds from the years the Kirk has spent on it. I am a lawyer concerned with matters of Public Law, with constitutions and the workings of government and society. That training perhaps affects my perception of such matters. Be that as it may, I am here interested in confessions from a non-theological viewpoint, and I draw on reading of confessions in a variety of jurisdictions. Our experience at Gilcomston South is not, however, irrelevant. It has confirmed for me the importance of confessions, and indeed the importance of the Westminster Confession. But that is to anticipate.

One of the curiosities of modern debates on confessions is how the nature of a church as a human society working within the legal system of a country is usually excluded from consideration. In Scotland it may have something to do with the magnificent statements in the Articles Declaratory of the Constitution of the Church of Scotland in Matters Spiritual in which the Church asserts its independence of the civil authority. Those Articles were, however, adopted as a package, negotiated, over a period of years, between the United Free Church and the Church of Scotland.[1] The Church of Scotland Act 1921, by which the lawfulness of the Articles was enacted by the civil authority, was then passed by Parliament.[2] Only when the legal side of things had been thus secured were the Articles adopted by the Church of Scotland, and the Union of 1929 between that church and the bulk of the United Free Church entered into. In so doing, however, the Church did not slough off its prior history nor its identity. Indeed, its identity, running back to the Reformation, is proudly claimed in the third of the Declaratory Articles.

1. R. Sjolinder, *Presbyterian Reunion in Scotland, 1907-1921*, trans. E. J. Sharpe, 1962 Acta Universitatis Upsalensis Studia Historico-Ecclesiastica Upsalensie No. 4.
2. F. Lyall, *Of Presbyters and Kings*, Aberdeen U.P., 1980; F. Lyall, 'The Westminster Confession: The Legal Position', in A. I. C. Heron ed., *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today*, Edinburgh, St Andrew Press, 1982, pp. 55-71. It is understood that a Legal Opinion given by Sir Thomas B. Smith, Q.C., to the Presbytery of Lothian, dated 25th January 1983, agrees substantially with the views as to the powers of the Church of Scotland expressed in the second cited discussion.

The establishment of identity is an important purpose of a Confession. 'Identity' is a curious word. According to the Oxford English Dictionary it appears in the Latin of the fifth century A.D. as a noun of condition or quality, invented to express the notion of 'sameness' and to augment such concepts as 'likeness' and 'oneness'. There are differing views as to its exact development, but the root in the Latin '*idem* — the same' seems incontrovertible. That root also gives rise to the word 'identification', the perception of identity between apparently separate things.

Even limited interaction between individuals requires some sort of common purpose — 'can two walk together except they be agreed?' (Amos 3:3). Within any grouping a degree of common purpose must be present for any organisation to exist. It is that purpose which must be 'the same' for there to be any coherent activity. It is also often useful that those who are called to direct the organisation shall understand or adhere to the common purpose to a degree not required by the ordinary member. And finally, in relation to outsiders, a display of the purpose held in common allows others to be attracted.

A confession of faith serves such purposes within a church or within an denomination. The beliefs held in common are expressed in the confession. Usually the more technical or 'difficult' elements are required to be acceded to by the elders and ministers, to whom the direction of the church is entrusted. And, as far as the outside world is concerned, the confession serves as a prospectus, indicating the doctrine which is preached within that church. Such at least would seem to be the desirable position.

The history of the church general shows all these elements. Who Jesus was and is, and what he taught, are matters of the utmost importance. If he is the way of salvation there is nothing more important. If he is one among other wise ethical teachers, then there is less urgency in the matter, for others have covered much the same ground, and some have framed their precepts more congenially and with more consideration for the weaknesses of human nature. At that stage, whether one follows Confucius or Christ may be a matter of culture and habit rather than conviction.

The early church was faced with various problems. The truths of the Gospel had to be communicated accurately. Error had to be combatted. What was held in common by the Christians should be stated so that these individuals could know who believed the same things that they did — a matter of practical necessity when, soon, persecution began and questions of security might be involved.

The record starts before the end of the New Testament. First, the purity of the message of Jesus had to be preserved. John speaks of 'many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh' (2 John 7). Paul talks of those who teach error, in such passages as 1 Timothy 1:19-20 and 2 Timothy 2:17-18. These adventurers were not conforming to what had been laid out in such

statements as 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, where, New Testament scholars tell us, certain of the *thats* indicate quotation.

Again, *bona fides* might have to be established. Paul begins his Letter to the Romans with what amounts to a short poem of faith (Romans 1:1-4). It would make sense for him to start that letter with a statement of their common faiths. After all, the Romans had only *heard* of Paul, and no doubt there were some in that church who were not too sure of him — the Jews would have seen to that.

In these instances Paul may have used his own words. It is, however, also possible, that he may have been reciting a series of propositions in common currency (almost like choruses) at the time. It is likely that, prior to the writing of the books of the New Testament, such simple propositional statements, almost formulae, were the way in which people held on to the basic Christian message which had been preached to them. They did not have our Bible to help them, and yet the strain of the church ran true in many hearts. Short, easily remembered statements could and clearly did function both as encapsulations of the truth for transmission to others, and also as identifiers of Christians among themselves. That is not to say, however, that there was no written message until the books of the New Testament came on the scene. Remember the debates of the Apostolic Council at Jerusalem, which may have taken place as early as fifteen years after the death of Christ. The outcome of that meeting was a specific letter to be sent to the Gentile churches with confirmation of the message to be spoken by its bearers (Acts 15:1-29, see esp. vv. 23-9, 22, with 30-32, and Acts 16:4-5). One notes, however, that the letter had its main impact in confirming an oral presentation of the Gospel.

The New Testament writings themselves have a part to play in the development. The Gospel records were written because there was a need, and, going by the preface to Acts, a demand, for a record of the historical facts upon which the faith was based. The epistles had a slightly different function. Some are for the encouragement of individuals, but many, including the bulk of Paul's writings, aim at setting out a correct statement of the faith, in some cases in specific opposition to error. Galatians is the obvious example.

When the Apostles were gone a major stage was reached. Where would the authority of any teaching lie? At the level of human organisation there was a need for a more summary presentation of the faith than was afforded by the New Testament. Paul did write some things which are hard to understand (2 Pet. 3:16). Some other expression of the truth was needed to summarise the common agreement of the church, both as to what he had meant as well as on other matters.

After the immediate New Testament times there were further developments. The writings of those we group as the Apostolic Fathers contain a number of the short summaries of much the same kind as

Paul may have used. There were also various creedal formulations of the faith being produced.[3] These at first had currency in different geographic areas, though some, for example what we call the Apostles' Creed, attained a wider authority. It is with the development of the organised church following upon its legalisation that statements authoritative for a whole church emerge.

Broadly there have been two major periods of confessional activity, one early and the other around the Reformation. Both these periods were marked by theological controversy.

The history of the early church is in a way quite astonishing, unless one remembers both the doctrine of original sin, and that God has an enemy. There was competition and dissension, faulty transmission of teaching and divergence of views. There was also deliberate invention or 'improvement' of the Gospel by those claiming special knowledge. The gnostics, objects of attack in Revelation, were but one group. Peter also says, running on from the words quoted above, that the 'ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction' Paul's difficult passages, 'as they do the other scriptures' (2 Pet. 3:16). So the process was well established early. But once the Apostles and those who had known the Apostles died out, and perhaps their successors as well, there was a sprouting of variant doctrines with no-one to whom to appeal to set the record straight.

At first, of course, the church was an illegal organisation. There was, therefore, not the opportunity — one can say nothing about need — to consider the matter on a general basis. But once the church became official, and then compulsory, organisation was necessary. The church itself in measure copied the structures of the Roman Empire, especially as men trained in its administration came over into the new body. Organically the church required a generally accepted statement of orthodoxy for all the reasons which justify confessions. A simple statement of orthodoxy would identify believers, serve as a challenge to the outside world, and act as a test for those to whom the leadership of the church was entrusted. But it seems to have been the last purpose which was the main trigger. Truth had to be stated against error, and those embracing error had to be removed from power and influence. There was struggle, both theological and political, and then, some hundreds of years after Christ, the major creeds and confessions of the early church were arrived at. The Nicene Creed, Ephesus and Chalcedon, and so on, emerge from this period.

At the next wave of activity the problem was greater. The accumulated tradition and variant opinions of the Roman Catholic Church could not be dealt with simply. It followed that the Reformers had to produce statements and formulations which were in considerable detail, and these we tend to call 'confessions'. In the main they were statements, affirming what were held as truths by their framers.

3. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. London, Longmans, 1972.

But the Westminster Confession, for example, shows also another technique in the drafting of confessions. While one would always wish to be positive, there are times when the condemnation of untruth is the better way to proceed. It may not be sufficient to affirm a series of matters, error may have to be specifically labelled as such. The condemnation of the claim of the papacy to be the head of the church is one example (25:6).

The Reformation confessions were major theological documents. At the same time we must also recognise that there was a political element in the production of some at least of them. The English Parliament, for example, took the initiative in calling the Westminster Assembly, which produced the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. It was also, by the way, that Parliament which asked for the proof verses to be added to the Confession, and this was done some months after the Assembly had agreed the text. This cuts the ground from the spurious argument that the Confession is *based* on sane texts which do not support its propositions. The Confession was agreed as a statement of the faith as understood by its compilers, and that statement does not depend for its authority upon the individual cited verses. The text is an encapsulation of agreement as to what the Bible teaches on the matters which it covers. While one may agree that some of the proof texts are inadequate, that does not destroy the statements to which they are attached.

But a confession of faith is only a human document. That of Westminster was negotiated among the participants in the Assembly. As it itself says, 'all councils may err' (31:4). The supreme judge in matters of faith is the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture (1:10). Therefore confessions of faith and any other synodical pronouncements 'are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as an help in both' (31:4). To allege, as some have, that a confession has resulted in the Bible being interpreted by the confession and not the other way round, is, therefore, a very serious matter, suggesting deviation from *both* Scripture *and* Confession.

Some have suggested that to have such things as confessions is itself an act of unfaith. They would argue that our faith and practice should be governed simply by the Bible, and we should accept into our Christian community, including to positions of leadership, anyone who claims to be a Christian. For some a confession interferes with the authority of the Bible, or implies that the Bible is insufficient. For others the use of a confession as an identifier restricts the liberty of Christians. Others again consider the confessions with their differences divisive of the Body of Christ. Finally, there are some who consider that confessions restrict theological inquiry, freezing matters in the thought patterns and understandings of a long dead and manifestly imperfect society whose presuppositions and axioms we do not necessarily share.

I cannot go along with such arguments. I can see some force in them, but that relates to what I would call the abuse of a confession, not its proper use.

The substratum of these arguments seems to be an inarticulate dissatisfaction with reality. The fact is that denominations and congregations are human societies or institutions, which exist within society as a whole. As such there are questions of authority and control, of structure and responsibility, of property and income and expenditure which have to be dealt with in a way which is recognised within the legal system which is the context of each church. Into such matters confessions have been brought, for, since they serve to identify the common purpose and agreements, as well as sometimes the aims of a grouping, they can also be used to identify and demarcate that group for the purpose of society as a whole. They can be so used, and are so used not by external pressure, but by the will of the group, be it church or denomination, itself.

It remains as necessary as ever that the understanding of the gospel be stated. Only thus can like-minded folk freely associate together. Only thus will people contribute to the common cause. One of the hazards of theological plurality within a denomination is that ordinary members of the denomination will become reluctant to see their contributions financing ministries and undertakings which proceed on theological bases significantly different from that which they themselves hold. Their proper stewardship of their money will lead them to ensure that their givings are, in their opinion, well spent. If the gospel is about questions of eternal destiny, there is a limit to the variation on these matters which any organisation can stand. The Wolfe Report on the finances of the Church of Scotland provides material for the elaboration of these difficulties.[4]

Does this indicate a heresy hunt? By no means. There must be room within a denomination for variant views. The question, however, then becomes the point at which a variation is so extreme as to go beyond the lawful parameters. I think that was the point originally being raised within the Church of Scotland in the 1960's, before the matter was hijacked and converted into an attempt to displace the Westminster Confession. It has yet to be dealt with, and probably cannot be for all purposes by any doctrinal statement. The question will have to be determined in individual contested cases, whether a given variant is acceptable or not. I would oppose too much sensitivity on such matters. Historically it has been destructive of the witness of the Gospel. Sufficient attention has not always been given to the teaching of the parables of the Tares (Matt. 13:24-29, 36-43) and of the Drag-net (Matt. 25:47-50), and the search for a 'pure' church has become introverted, argumentative and unattractive to those outside

4. J. N. Wolfe and M. Pickford, *The Church of Scotland: An Economic Survey*, London, Chapman, 1980.

the church, thus failing in one of the primary Christian responsibilities, to win others for the Lord. At the same time churches have also been harmed by allowing continued membership to persons who clearly do not adhere to basic doctrines held by them. This confuses ordinary members, and provides ground for contempt by outsiders, again leading to the Gospel itself being ignored. Pragmatically (though arguably less importantly), the influence of the church even on secular matters is also thereby diminished. Why pay attention to those who claim some spiritual authority, but whose own house is manifestly in a mess?

Those who object to a confessional statement as restrictive seem to want the benefits of membership of the group which adheres to that statement without the restriction that the statement produces. Those who see a confession as divisive often seem to want to replace a form of church government which they have found uncongenial, and to introduce people with one set of beliefs to the ownership and use of church property and finances which were specifically contributed to an organisation holding a different set of beliefs.

This seems odd. Certainly if there is unanimity and identity between two groups there is no obstacle. Both, presumably, can agree to the confessional statement of the other. But in some cases one begins to have doubts as to what is really going on. The vehemence with which a confession is attacked can raise questions as to the integrity of an attacker who holds office within the church to whose confession he objects. Indeed, without going to the point of attack, it is observable that when a minister is known to hold views which do not square with the confession of his church, the status of all ministers is diminished. The world gleefully picks on what it construes as hypocrisy.

Am I therefore against all church union and the ecumenical process? By no means! But I would approach such matters from a somewhat different angle. It may well make no sense in organisational terms to have separate denominations operating within a given community where there is doctrinal agreement between them. But whether that situation calls for a union of the denominations, or for it to be agreed that one denomination take on the task of being the church in that area, is a different matter. And, apart from matters of doctrine, there are also questions of church government. Though I consider presbyterianism to be the form of church government most agreeable to the Word of God, and to afford benefits not found in other systems, to an extent such questions are matters of culture, and it is a nonsense to attempt to fuse divergent cultural traditions. 'That they may be one' is frequently quoted to argue the necessity of a united church, with a common pattern of government, or even, within certain new developments, of different patterns within some overall pattern. But the quotation runs on 'even as I and the Father are one', and there are, of course, three Persons in the Trinity. I see no duty for union in the way it is often presented, and rather marvel at the obtuseness of some

who in practice despise the strengths of the organisations which have developed in their separate ways, or would willingly forfeit strength for a superficial unity. Some unions do make sense. Some are pursued for defective reasons of ideology.

But we are away from the matter of confessions. Confessions do enter into such questions, and are part of the reality which has to be addressed since they have been called into the way in which a state deals with a church. If one were to be setting up a new church or denomination, one would be free to do what one wished within the ordinary tenor of the law. Unfortunately a goodly part of discussions on the matter of confessions within existing denominations seems to assume a similar freedom of action, but without necessarily actually having it. In law a particular confession may be built into the identity of a denomination or a church. If such a present situation proves inconvenient, there is a temptation to elide the difficulty by an appeal to the Headship of Christ. It is argued that the church has an inherent power to do as it will with its doctrines since it is answerable only to its Lord.[5] The suggestion may be unwelcome that it could be unlawful, not to say immoral, to take the property and finances of an existing denomination, which were contributed on the basis of that denomination's particular identity as linked with, if not defined by, a particular confession. And yet it is the normal position in many legal systems that the property held by, or held in trust for, a congregation or a denomination, is held for the principles of the group concerned. It may be, of course, that one of those principles is the right to change its principles in response to new light if what was formerly professed is in some way deficient. Usually, however, modern views find deficiency to reside in undue precision as to the truths held. On matters of Heaven and Hell that precision would seem, however, to be desirable.

But even where there are legal constrictions, the law may be changed so that power to change becomes one of the principles. In Australia the law was changed to permit the formation of the Uniting Church of Australia, but the normal principle was also affirmed.[6] Again, other legal systems avoid the matter by refusing to get involved in internal church disputes. In the United States, the separation of church and state provided for by the First Article of the Bill of Rights means that the courts are wary in their approach to such matters, and ordinarily do not enter into such areas.[7]

But all that has to do with the institutional side of confessions, and perhaps, in the last analysis, the least important element of their

5. This was an argument in *Bannatyne* v *Lord Overtoun* (the Free Church case) (1904) 7 F. (H.L.)1; [1904] A.C. 515; R. L. Orr, ed., *The Free Church of Scotland Appeals, 1903-4*, Edinburgh, MacNiven and Wallace, 1904. It was rejected.

6. *Attorney-General for New South Wales (at the Relation of Neil MacLeod and Another)* v *Grant and Another* [1976] 10 A.L.R. 1; [1976] 135 C.L.R. 587; (1977) 51 A.L.J.R. 10.

7. *Watson* v *Jones* (1871) 13 Wall. 697; *Presbyterian Church* v *Mary Elizabeth Blue Hull Memorial Presbyterian Church* (1969) 393 U.S. 440.

utility. It ignores that important statement already quoted from the Westminster Confession. All councils may err, and therefore confessions of faith and any other synodical pronouncements 'are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as an help in both' (cap. xxxi.4).

One of the things I have done in recent years has been to burrow through many of the Blue Books, the *Reports to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.* Occasionally a note would be sounded here and there, when the reports did report the feelings of the ordinary church members. It was a desire that they should be taught the faith, in deeper measure than they were then receiving.[8]

The consecutive preaching through the Scriptures is one way in which such a desire can be met, and is met at Gilcomston South Church. Familiarity with the Confession is another, and it has, with profit, been dealt with at our weekly meetings for Bible study. It therefore seems regrettable that the debate on the Confession showed that many elders, and even ministers, were not aware of its content. Given the content of ordination vows, that is puzzling, but, irrespective of that point, it remains true that confessions can be 'an help' in getting to know the faith. The phraseology is sometimes difficult, but the effort is worth it and has been made by many. Let no-one dismiss a confession merely because the language is said to be 'difficult'. C. S. Lewis points out that it is just not true that such language cannot be understood by ordinary people.[9] It can be, and is, though sometimes modern translations can help.[10]

To return to the Westminster Confession itself, it was the product of a number of men, sitting down together and seeking to put down on paper within a short compass their understanding of the Christian faith. It has its defects, not the least being the absence of a chapter on the Holy Spirit, and yet that Confession is very helpful and honest. It does not, for example, seek contortedly to harmonise Free Will and Predestination, but sets them both out as they may be found within the Bible itself. So often, on various matters, it provides a succinct statement, holding in tension major matters which others take pages to explicate for their professional readership. We ordinary members have neither the training nor the time to plough through the theologians. We appreciate the utility of the Confession, but without elevating it to an undue status. We, like its drafters, hold it subordinate to Scripture, and expect our ministers to teach us the faith. It is one of the marks of William Still's skill as a teacher of the faith that through his ministry so many have come to understand the truths contained in

8. Given the circumstances, I have also to report that there was usually coupled with that plea for teaching a request for shorter sermons, a request proven to be incompatible with the plea.
9. 'Before We Can Communicate', in C. S. Lewis, *Undeceptions: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, W. Hooper, ed., London, Bles, 1971, pp. 211-214.
10. A good modern translation of the American version of the Westminster Confession, with the U.S. variants, is D. Kelly, H. McClure and P. B. Rollinson, eds., *The Westminster Confession of Faith: A New Edition*, Greenwood, South Carolina, Attic Press, 1979.

the particular confession which historically is the strength of the Church of Scotland, and not only understood them, but allowed them to be 'an help' to the *practice* of the faith.