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A THEOLOGY OF CONFESSIONAL THEOLOGY

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Recent decades have seen a return of confessional theology in many circles.¹ Generally, there has been a revived sense that theology is a profession of faith grounded in Christian commitment and dependent on the teaching tradition of the church, in contrast to a critical study of theology.² Horton observes that ‘the more that modern foundationalism is shaken off, the greater the openness to particular confessional theologies’.³ More specifically, there has been a growing interest in theology which is grounded in the creeds and confessions of the church and is self-conscious of its commitment to a specific confessional tradition. Three recent Reformed single volume theologies have significant discussions of the place of creeds and confessions in their theological method, though this has not been a prominent feature of works from earlier decades.⁴ There has been a flurry of books which offer theological discussion

¹ This article is based on material presented at the Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference, August 2017.

² Mary M. Veeneman, *Introducing Theological Method: A Survey of Contemporary Theologians and Approaches*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), pp. 15-33 gives Avery Dulles, Karl Barth and Wolfhart Pannenberg as leading examples of what she calls ‘Ressourcement and Neo-orthodox Theologies’. See also John Webster, ‘Theologies of Retrieval’, in the *Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. by John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 583–99 and *Theologies of Retrieval: An Exploration and Appraisal*, ed. by Darren Sarisky (London: T&T Clark/Bloomsbury, 2017). Katherine Sonderegger, John Webster, Kevin Vanhoozer, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Matthew Levering, Colin Gunton, Robert Jensen, David Fergusson, Kathryn Tanner and Cornelis van der Kooi are some recent thinkers who view the task of theology as confession rather than criticism.

³ M.S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 4.

⁴ M. Allen & S. Swain, ‘Introduction’, *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic*, ed. by M. Allen and S. R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), pp. 1-6. R. Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), pp. 33-35, 220-41, and J.R. Beeke & P.M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), I, pp. 83-114. R. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*: 2nd Edition (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), pp. xxxii-xxxiv, notes the importance of engaging with creeds and confessions, but includes Calvin’s *Institutes* as a source alongside the Reformed confessions. Earlier single volume systematic theolo-

explicitly grounded in creeds or confessions.⁵ My concern with this specific turn to confessional theology, particularly in the Reformed tradition.

Reformed Catholicity serves as an exemplar of this confessional turn. As described by Allen and Swain in their manifesto, Reformed Catholicity is, first and foremost, a return to the study of Scripture. Distinctively, it holds that the key to theological interpretation of Scripture is the great tradition, especially in its Reformed expression and particularly in its confessions. Allen and Swain insist that ‘to be more biblical, one must also be engaged in the process of traditioning’. They find an important pedagogic order — first confession or catechism then Scripture. They declare ‘one is catechized, then formed as a theologian, and finally capable of reading the Bible well’.⁶ The Reformed confessions serve as rules for reading Scripture as they help us pursue ‘the kind of biblical interpretation that

gies by Grudem, Erickson, McGrath and even Horton do not have an equivalent discussion.

⁵ E.g., M.H. Micks, *Loving the Questions: An Exploration of the Nicene Creed* (New York: Church Publishing, 2005); *Conversations with the Confessions: Dialogue in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. by J.D. Small (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2005); D.E. Willis, *Clues to the Nicene Creed: A Brief Outline of the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); *Evangelicals and Nicene Faith*, ed. by T. George (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011); K. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Group, 2011); C. Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2014); M.F. Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe — an Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016); A. Janssen, *Confessing the Faith Today: A Fresh Look at the Belgic Confession* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016); F. Sanders, *The Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016); B. Myers, *The Apostles' Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2018); *Recovering Historical Christology for Today's Church*, ed. M. Jones (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2019); *The Synod of Dort: Historical, Theological, and Experiential Perspectives*, ed. by J.R. Beeke and M.I. Klauber (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020); S. Tsoukalas, *The Neglected Trinity: Recovering from Theological Amnesia* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021); N.A. Almodovar, Nancy & E. Rachut, *Creedal Apologetics: Learning to Use the Apostles' Creed to Defend and Proclaim the Christian Faith* (Eugene: Resource Publications, 2021); M. Heymel, *Woran glaubst du? Evangelischer Glaube im Gespräch* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt 2021); A. Irving, *We Believe: Exploring the Nicene Faith* (London: IVP, 2021); D.F. Ottati, *Living Belief: A Short Introduction to Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022); T. Hart, *Confessing and Believing: The Apostles' Creed as Script for the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2022).

⁶ M. Allen & S. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), pp. 83-85.

accords with God's overarching economy of salvation and that promotes faith'. Confessions summarise 'the plain teaching of Holy Scripture [...] in a way that reflects Scripture's own proportions and purpose' and thus equip us 'to read the various parts of Scripture in light of the whole and with an eye to Scripture's ultimate purpose'.⁷

Church dogmas provide [...] a divinely authorized interpretive key for unlocking the treasures of God's Word, a blessed pathway into Holy Scripture. In terms of more recent hermeneutical parlance, the rule of faith offers an entry point into the "hermeneutical spiral," that fruitful interplay of pre-understanding, reading, and growth in understanding that characterizes all acts of reading.⁸

The order of confession then Bible is pedagogic, and not the order in which the two are given. Allen and Swain stress that Scripture is the source and tradition is goal. They quote Bavinck: 'the external word is the instrument, the internal word the aim'. Scripture reaches its 'destination when all have been taught by the Lord and are filled with the Holy Spirit'.⁹ The tradition of the church is the result of her hearing the Lord and formulating her faith in dependence on his revelation, by the power of the Spirit.

Because Scripture leads to confession, the Reformed church must continue to test and prove its confessions against Scripture. Allen and Swain warn that when this task is 'ignored or forsaken', then 'theology quickly degenerates into an arid repetition of dogmatic symbols'. In the movement of traditioning and testing they allow that the 'various expressions of the rule of faith are always subject to revision and reform in light of the clear teaching of Holy Scripture'. The need to test and even revise the confessional tradition is set alongside a hearty confidence in the work of the Spirit in the church, which undergirds a conservative confessional assumption. Confessional doctrines 'stand as "irreversible" expressions of the rule of faith, expressions with which all later summaries of the rule of faith must cohere and which all further summaries of the rule of faith must exhibit'. They are 'ancient landmarks' which are not to be moved.¹⁰

⁷ Allen & Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*, pp. 108-11.

⁸ Allen & Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*, pp. 113-14.

⁹ Allen & Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*, p. 36, quoting H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. J. Bolt, trans. J. Vriend, 4 vols (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003-2008), I, p. 493.

¹⁰ Allen & Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*, pp. 111-12. See the comments on confessional revision in C.R. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), pp. 191-98.

The confessional turn appeals to two authorities — Scripture and confessions. Reformed and evangelical theology is well served by any number of studies of the doctrine of Scripture.¹¹ In contrast, there is little theological reflection available on the nature of confessions and their authority. There have been a range of useful recent studies of the creeds and confessions.¹² Historically, Francis Turretin and James Bannerman gave significant expositions of the theology of confessing.¹³ Trueman offers a broader defense of the validity of moving from Scripture to doctrine, with some consideration of the need to transmit doctrine and the role of the church.¹⁴ Rayburn sets out the case that creeds and confessions persuasively present

¹¹ B.B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Nutley: P&R, 1948); J.I. Packer, *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958); M. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972); J.I. Packer, *Freedom, Authority and Scripture* (Leicester: IVP, 1981); *Scripture and Truth*, ed. by D.A. Carson & J. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983); *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. by D.A. Carson & J. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986); *The Trustworthiness of God*, ed. by P. Helm & C. Trueman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); T. Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009); J. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2010); Scott R. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and Its Interpretation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011); *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. by D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016); J. S. Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place: The Doctrine of Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018).

¹² James T. Dennison Jr., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, 4 vols (Reformation Heritage, 2008–2014); J. Pelikan, V. Hotchkiss, *Credo: historical and theological guide to creeds and confessions of faith in the Christian tradition*, 4 vols (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003); William L. Lumpkin and Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Judson Press, 2011); C. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012); D. Fairbairn & R.M. Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions: Tracing the Development of the Christian Faith*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019).

¹³ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1868), I, pp. 277–302; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1992–1997), III, pp. 285–293. See also W. Hetherington, 'Introductory Essay', pp. 11–34 in R. Shaw, *The Reformed Faith: an Exposition of the Westminster Confession* (Tain: Christian Focus, 2008).

¹⁴ Trueman, *Creedal*, pp. 51–80. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'May We Go Beyond What Is Written after All? The Pattern of Theological Authority and the Problem of Doctrinal Development', pp. 747–792 in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. by D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), gives a similar and fuller

to the current generation ‘the convictions to which the Lord has already brought his people as the foundation for the church’s present and future life and work.’¹⁵ Allen offers some basis for the ‘confessional principle’ in Reformed theology, clarifying how the Scripture principle leads to the distinction between the magisterial authority of Christ and his Word, and the ministerial authority of the church and its judgements. He reflects on the task of the church and its empowerment by the Spirit.¹⁶ This article offers a theology of confessing, considering the nature and role of confession and how church confessions serve as theological authorities.

TO BE A CHRISTIAN IS TO CONFESS

Barth, characteristically, sets out an understanding of the act of confession grounded in a Christologically determined anthropology. The proper response for humans is to ‘bear express witness’ to God. We are made for God by his Word. We receive his Word and are called to respond, concretely, by our answering speech.

In all encounters between God and man this is the issue—that God commands man to be His witness: not just His dumb witness or His unwilling witness; but explicitly His witness, in the execution and in the act of His confession in a particular, marked way.¹⁷

The content of this praise is not our invention, but our repetition of God’s word to us about himself. It has no ‘purpose’ but to respond to and honour God so it is ‘more of the nature of a game or song than of work or warfare’.¹⁸

In another place Barth explains that ‘confessing is the moment in the act of faith in which the believer stands to his faith, or, rather, to the One in whom he believes, the One whom he acknowledges and recognises, the living Jesus Christ; and does so outwardly, again in general terms, in face

argument for the necessity for developing doctrine, which he affirms must be catholic but has only a passing reference to the authority of creeds.

¹⁵ Robert S. Rayburn ‘Biblical and Pastoral Basis for Creeds and Confessions’, in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, ed. by D. Hall (Powder Springs: The Covenant Foundation, 2018. 3rd ed.), p. 48.

¹⁶ M. Allen, ‘Confessions’, *The Cambridge Companion to Reformed Theology*, ed. by P.T. Nimmo, D.A.S. Fergusson (Cambridge: CUP, 2016), pp. 28–32.

¹⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation*, 4/3, ed. by G.W. Bromiley, T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), p. 73.

¹⁸ Barth, *CD* 3/4. p. 77.

of men'.¹⁹ Barth treats confession as the first concrete act of worship, even before prayer.

Barth's observation reflects the biblical pattern in which the praise of Israel and the church is filled with the joyful narration of God's works for his people (1 Chr. 16:8–22; Pss. 22:23–24; 103:108; Isa. 63:7–9; Jer. 20:13; 2 Cor. 9:15; Col. 1:15–20; Eph. 1:3–14; Heb. 13:15; Jas. 5:13). Christian confession, starting with the affirmation that Jesus is Lord (Luke 6:46; Rom. 10:9; Phil. 2:11; Col. 2:6), includes songs and spoken praise, preaching and witness as well as formal statements of faith.

In our confession we identify ourselves with the Lord, praise him and bear witness to him. Confession is one of the fundamental actions of disciples who 'acknowledge' (ὁμολογέω) Jesus (Matt. 10:23–33). During Jesus' trial Peter denied him (Mk. 14:30, 68–72); while Jesus made the 'good confession' (Mk. 14:62; John 18:33–37; 1 Tim. 6:13). The contrast underlines that faithful discipleship requires confession.²⁰ Confession is the start of the Christian life (Rom 10:9), marks its continuation, (2 Cor. 9:13, 1 Tim. 6:12, 2 Tim. 2:19; Heb. 3:1, 13:15) and is the eschatological goal (Rom. 14:11, Phil. 2:11).

Barth recognises that while confession may provide a basis for instruction it is first the response to God. It will include denials and condemnations of false views, but it does so to protect God's honour, and any 'No' in our confession serves the joyful acknowledgement of who God is and what he has done, just as 'God Himself, [...] says Yes, and only incidentally, relatively and for the sake of the Yes does He say No'.²¹ Barth warns of the tendency for the confessor to be 'God's detective, policeman and bailiff', naming and shaming heresy, rather than primarily professing God's majesty and mercy. Though creeds and confessions are provoked by heresy and theological debates and have a necessarily polemic aspect they are first the echo of God's redeeming word to his people. They will be occupied 'with Jesus Christ, with the covenant fulfilled in Him, with the reconciliation accomplished in Him, with His lordship as exclusive lordship, with His unity with God and therefore with the source of all good'.²²

This expansive view of confession is reflected in the Scots Confession which opens declaring that the reformers have long thirsted to declare their faith to the world. Now they are able to 'set forth this brief and plain confession of such doctrine as is propounded unto us, and as we believe

¹⁹ Barth, *CD* 4/1, p. 777.

²⁰ J.R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Grand Rapids/Leicester: Eerdmans/Apollos, 2002), pp. 451–52.

²¹ Barth, *CD* 3/4, pp. 78–81.

²² Barth, *CD* 3/4, p. 84.

and profess'. The Scots Confession is well known for its vigour and joy. The opening of the first article opens: 'We confess and acknowledge one only God, to whom only we must cleave, whom only we must serve (Deut. 6), whom only we must worship (Isa. 44), and in whom only we put our trust (Deut. 4)'. This is not merely a formal statement of doctrine, but a confession of the God who has saved and to whom the church is devoted.

THE CHURCH CONFESSES

Volf observes that a church is constituted in the public corporate confession of faith.²³ While each Christian makes their own confession (Rom 10:9), it is a church activity in which the individual participates. The church is created to confess God's name and his deeds. The redemptive and revealing work of the Triune God is the basis for what Webster denotes as an evangelical ecclesiology in which 'gospel and church exist in a strict and irreversible order, one in which the gospel precedes and the church follows'.²⁴ As the church is formed by God through the gospel it repeats the gospel in its confession. Doctrine is a key mode in which the church gives its confession. The church is called to teach and to set out its teaching in a coherent and comprehensible way.²⁵ There is no assurance of the infallibility of the church, but there is a proper doctrine of indefectibility, or perhaps better perseverance: God will keep his church knowing and confessing him (Pss. 72:17; 102:28; Matt. 16:18; 28:19-20).

THE CHURCH CATHOLIC CONFESSES

As the company of God's redeemed embodied people the visible church is diachronic, it has historical depth and grows in knowledge of God through time. Successive generations within the church continue to grasp the knowledge of God and deepen in it. Paul's Ephesian prayers for growing unity in knowledge of the truth (Eph. 1:17-19; 3:14-19) receive a historical answer before their eschatological realisation. Bavinck underlines the historical progress of churches knowledge of God.

Scripture is not designed so that we should parrot it but that as free children of God we should think his thoughts after him [...] so much study and reflec-

²³ M. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 150.

²⁴ J. Webster, 'On Evangelical Ecclesiology', *Ecclesiology* 1.1 (2004), p. 10.

²⁵ On the viability and necessity of developing doctrine see Trueman, *Creedal*, pp. 51-80; Vanhoozer, 'May We Go Beyond What Is Written after All?' and M.S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), pp. 238-64.

tion on the subject is bound up with it that no person can do it alone. That takes centuries. To that end the church has been appointed and given the promise of the Spirit's guidance into all truth.²⁶

Thus, church doctrine may and should develop. Bannerman argues that the example of the apostles John and Paul opposing false teaching (1 John 4:2–3; 1 Tim. 1: 20; 2 Tim. 2:17, 18) and the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) show 'the necessity [...] for re-casting the doctrines of Scripture in a new mould, and exhibiting or explaining it afresh under forms of language and expression more precisely fitted to meet and counteract the error of the times'.²⁷ As the church encounters new situations and challenges, including internal heresy and external ideologies and religious views it confesses its faith, often using new terms and concepts to explicate what is biblical.²⁸ In the course of this response, the church gains fuller insight into the faith. It is not authorised to mint new revelation, but to unfold more fully what is already implicit in biblical revelation. Authoritative biblical revelation is settled, the churches confession can and should develop.

The catholic church is not only the church of the past, but also the global church of today. Reformed theology should be interested in the confession of churches in all nations and culture, and in other Christian traditions.²⁹ A Reformed theologian should be well grounded in their own confessional tradition, as I will argue below, but this is not as a defence against other traditions but a basis to engage with and learn from others.

THE TEACHING TASK OF THE OFFICES OF THE CHURCH

Above I affirmed Volf's assertion that the church is constituted by its confession of the truth together, yet I demur from his claim that salvation is mediated through 'one another', *not* through the office-holders.³⁰ The teachers of the church, while not the *esse* of the church, are entrusted with

²⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, p. 83, cf. I, p. 457 'the church has [...] a many-sided and profound pedagogical significance for all believers till the day they die'.

²⁷ Bannerman, *Church*, I, p. 294.

²⁸ 'It is a fact, often enough acknowledged in the histories of Christian thought and doctrine, that the church's grasp of the truth revealed in Holy Scripture has developed in stages and that these stages or epochs were defined by a particularly concentrated reflection on some central element of the gospel usually provoked by an especially dangerous assault on that truth from within the church itself', Rayburn, p. 26.

²⁹ See Stephen Pardue, 'What Hath Wheaton To Do With Nairobi? Toward Catholic and Evangelical. Theology', *JETS* 58.4 (2015), 757–70.

³⁰ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p. 222.

the ministry of preserving the faith of the church in its confession. They have a particular responsibility to and for the church to proclaim 'the whole will of God' (Acts 20:27). This task is set out in the pastoral epistles where 1 Timothy 2:2 is the most explicit statement of this responsibility: 'What you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well'. The apostolic faith was to be passed on and false teaching countered (1 Tim. 1:3–5; 6:3–4, 20–21; 2 Tim. 1:13–14; 2:14, 23; Titus 1:10–11; 2:1; 3:8–9); so, the elders had to be competent for this task (1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Tim. 2:24–25; Titus 1:9; 3:10–11). The Reformed tradition recognises that God appoints teachers and rulers of the church: 'the Lord Jesus, as King and Head of His Church, hath therein appointed a government, in the hand of Church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate' (WCF 30.1). These governors have a ministry of teaching the church and the power of discipline. Those two aspects of their work unite when they establish the confession of the church.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

As the church is given the task of confession, so its confession has an authority. This authority is given by Christ, which is why the discussion of church authority is often related to Jesus' gift of 'the keys of the kingdom' (Matt. 16:19), for 'the person with the keys has power to exclude or permit entrance'.³¹ The apostles, and with them the church, is given the task to proclaim the gospel, to declare to those who believe that they are received into the kingdom and to warn those who reject the gospel that they are excluded. Since the church is given an authority to confess the gospel, it is also authorised to regulate that confession.

The authority of the church to bind people to and loose them from the kingdom depends on what has already been determined in heaven. In reference to the promise to Peter, Carson comments,

Whatever he binds or looses will have been bound or loosed, so long as he adheres to that divinely disclosed gospel. He has no direct pipeline to heaven, still less do his decisions force heaven to comply; but he may be authoritative in binding and loosing because heaven has acted first. Those he ushers in or excludes have already been bound or loosed by God according to the

³¹ D. A. Carson, 'Matthew', in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), VIII, p. 370; see pp. 370–74 for a full discussion of this key verse. See also G. W. Bromiley, 'Keys, Power Of The,' in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Revised, ed. by G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979–1988), pp. 11–12.

gospel already revealed and which Peter, by confessing Jesus as the Messiah, has most clearly grasped.³²

This is ‘ministerial’ authority. The church is empowered to proclaim and apply the Word of God which it is given. Turretin appeals to the power of the keys to make this point. He adds that the commission of an office must include ‘the power and right of exercising it’ and observes that the teaching office is given titles which recognise its authority — those who direct (1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Thess. 5:12), rule (Heb. 13:7, 17) and govern (1 Cor. 12:28), overseers (Acts 20:28) and stewards (1 Cor. 4:1, 2; Tit. 1:7). Leaders in the church in the Old Testament and New Testament exercise authority (1 Cor. 14:32; 2 Cor. 10:4-8; 13:10; Acts 15:24; 16:4). He insists that this authority is ministerial, economical (i.e. in the role of a steward) and serving. Ministers have no lordship and no authority to promulgate new laws. They serve by teaching and applying ‘the laws of Christ’.³³

THE CONCILIAR EXERCISE OF THE TEACHING OFFICE

The authoritative determination of the confession of the church is always a corporate task.³⁴ In this view, Reformed theology follows the conciliar tradition in the medieval church.³⁵ Conciliarism formed the basis of much thinking about ministry in the Reformation, as well as the recognition of the importance of councils.³⁶ One implication is that the official minis-

³² Carson, ‘Matthew’, p. 373. See his discussion on understanding *eimi deō* and *eimi lyō* as periphrastic futures (‘shall have been bound/ shall have been bound loosed’), meaning that the prior decision of God now revealed in the gospel authorises the apostles to announce bidding and loosing.

³³ Turretin, *Institutes*, III, pp. 276-78.

³⁴ See T. David Gordon ‘The Church’s Power: Its Relation to Subscription’, in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, ed. by D. Hall, 3rd ed (Powder Springs: The Covenant Foundation, 2018), pp. 364-68.

³⁵ Avis, P. *Beyond the Reformation?: authority, primacy and unity in the conciliar tradition* (London: T & T Clark, 2006), pp. 22-24; B. Gordon, ‘The New Parish’, *A Companion to the Reformation World*, ed. by R.P. Hisa (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 412-13.

³⁶ See P. Foresta, ‘Transregional Reformation: Synods and Consensus in the Early Reformed Churches’ *Journal of Early Modern Christianity* 2.2 (2015), 189-203; P. Robinson, ‘History and Freedom in Luther’s *On the Councils and the Church*’ *Concordia Journal* 43:1&2 (Winter/Spring 2017), 75-87. For Calvin, monarchical episcopacy is an attack on the whole church, not simply on the rights of lesser clergy; J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by F.L. Battles, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), IV.11. vi, p. 1216. Bullinger’s *De Conciliis* was an important work in setting out the

try of the church is representative of and conditioned by the church as a whole. Bavinck summarises this view that 'the power of ministers actually belongs to the congregation but is exercised by them in its name'.³⁷

The biblical argument for conciliarism was developed by medieval thinkers such as Jean Gerson (1363-1429). In part, he based his argument on texts which call for authority in the church to be used for the service of others (Lk. 12:42-48; John 10:11,15; 21:17; Rom. 14:21; 1 Cor. 8:13; 1 Tim. 1:15). More particularly he argued from Matthew 18:18-19 that the whole church has the power of discipline over all its members, and this must include the pope. Paul's rebuke of Peter in Galatians 2 is a plain instance in which even a pope stands in need of correction. Jethro's advice to Moses to appoint judges, rather than carry the load himself (Exodus 18) and the council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) are obvious biblical examples of conciliarism. Flanagan concludes that 'Gerson's conciliarism was built very simply on the biblically based belief that the sort of absolute papalism espoused by many [...] was incompatible with the divine structure of the church evident in the scriptures'.³⁸

The Reformers rejected Gerson's view that Church councils could not err yet adopted his exegetical argument to show that the doctrine of the church should be established by councils. The importance of councils for the discipline and doctrine of the church was been a persistent note Reformed Confessions. The French Confession (1560) affirms that ministers serve the church by preaching and administering the sacraments. They with elders and deacons 'form the council of the Church; that by these means the true religion may be preserved, and the true doctrine everywhere propagated' (Art. XXX). The Westminster Confession has the fullest treatment of councils among the Reformed Confessions, affirming their value for 'the better government, and further edification of the Church' (31.1) and their ministerial authority to determine 'controversies

need for councils and their fallibility, see P. Ha, 'Puritan Conciliarism: Why Walter Travers Read Bullinger's "De Conciliis"' *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 42.1 (Spring 2011), p. 75.

³⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, p. 377. He does not entirely agree with this claim, saying that the office is one of service and is for the sake of the church, but that the authority of the office comes from Christ not from the church. At this point, Bavinck assumes a choice between authorisation by Christ and his use of the church to appoint and authorise the office bearers. We can affirm both.

³⁸ D.Z. Flanagan, 'God's Divine Law. The Scriptural Founts of Conciliar Theory in Jean Gerson', in *The Church, the Councils, and Reform: The Legacy of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. by G. Christianson, T.M. Izbicki, C.M. Bellitto (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2008), p. 119.

of faith' and to regulate the worship, government and administration of the church (31.3). It uses many of the same texts as Gerson to establish its doctrine.

On this account, a document is recognised as a confession of the church if it has been approved or received by a council of the teachers of the church. This could be at a local level, though usually it is some broader body. The question of what constitutes a council of the church will be answered differently in various polities and need not be determined in this discussion. For the sake of theology, we may happily consult a range of creeds and confessions, particularly those which have been widely received.

THE AUTHORITY OF CONFESSIONS

We come now to the most pressing question for Protestants about the confessions of the church, what authority may they claim? McCormack observes in relation to the demise of confessionalism in mainstream Reformed thought that 'the greatest theological problem confronting Reformed theology today [...] is the problem of ecclesial authority'.³⁹

I am not here concerned with the authority of the church to impose its confessions. That is strictly a matter of discipline, rather than doctrine. Churches may or may not require subscription to a confession and those that do have varying terms of subscription.⁴⁰ The theologian as they are a member or officer of a particular church will have responsibilities to uphold a confession on the terms of that church.

We can consider the question in terms of the reliability of the teaching confessions, since the authority of church confessions is ministerial and depends on their faithfulness to God's Word. The answer must be carefully articulated. God keeps his church in the truth, but the teaching of the church is not directly identified with God's truth. We cannot *presume* that all teaching of the church is reliable. The ecclesiological reflections above set out the case for an expectation of a reliable tradition, but this

³⁹ Bruce L. McCormack, 'The End of Reformed Theology? The Voice of Karl Barth in the Doctrinal Chaos of the Present', in *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*, ed. by Wallace M. Alston, Jr. & Michael Welker (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), p. 54.

⁴⁰ See the discussions of various approaches to subscription in D. Hall, 'Confessing the Faith and Confessions of Faith', *Confessing the Faith Yesterday and Today Essays Reformed, Dissenting, and Catholic*, ed. by A.P.F. Sell (Wipf and Stock, 2013), pp. 12-16 argues for the Congregationalist practice of holding a church confession without requiring subscription.

must be demonstrated, repeatedly, by the examination of the content of the tradition and its consensus.

The consensual position of the Reformed confessions from the classic confessional period (1528-1675) is evidence of the reliability of the confessional tradition.⁴¹ The formation of the Synod of Dordt, with members from England, Scotland, German principalities and Switzerland, was both a sign of this consensus, and served to consolidate it.⁴² Muller notes the geographical and theological breadth of the key contributors to Reformed confessions and observes the consensus in 'a consistent reading of the issues of scripture as the Word of God and 'human traditions'; the insistence of 'the priority of the word over the church'; and the marks of the church as true doctrine and right administration of the sacraments. The confessions consistently affirm ecumenical Trinitarian and Christological positions. They 'rule out a physical, bodily, or local presence' of Christ in the Lord's Supper, condemn the Mass and transubstantiation, but affirm a spiritual relationship of Christ to the sacraments. 'The death of Christ is defined [...] as a full satisfaction for sin, and [...] is consistently posed against other means of reconciliation or satisfaction [...] Christ is confessed to be the one and only high priest who alone intercedes with the Father'. The confessions hold to salvation by grace alone, through faith not works, and 'the denial of meritorious works is either made explicit or strongly implied'. The presentation of salvation is monergistic, and many of the confessions include statements about the eternal decrees of God and the doctrine of predestination. The 17th century national creeds (Dort, the Irish Articles and the Westminster Confession) though more detailed, follow a similar pattern of thought while introducing a covenant theology not explicit in the 16th century confessions. Muller's judgement is that the Reformed tradition demonstrates 'considerable diversity within a confessional orthodoxy'.⁴³

The verdict of the Reformation was that the tradition was reliable yet required reformation. The course of the Reformation was shaped by the papal excommunication of Luther which demonstrated Rome's refusal to

⁴¹ S.H. Moore, 'Reformed theology and puritanism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformed Theology*, ed. by P.T. Nimmo and D.A.S. Fergusson (Cambridge: CUP, 2016), pp. 202-9.

⁴² M. Jones, *Why Heaven Kissed Earth: The Christology of the Puritan Reformed Orthodox theologian, Thomas Goodwin, (1600-1680)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), p. 72.

⁴³ R.A. Muller, 'Reformed Theology, 1600-1800', in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theology, 1600-1800* (Oxford: OUP, 2016) pp. 168-70.

accept his rediscovery of the gospel.⁴⁴ The anathemas of Trent gave conciliar agreement to the rejection of Protestant convictions. Thus, to hold to the Reformation claims entails conflict with elements of the conciliar tradition. The Westminster divines assert that ‘all synods or councils [...] and many have erred’, so ‘they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice, but to be used as a help in both’ (WCF 31.4).⁴⁵

The tensions involved are captured most pointedly by asking if it is sustainable to assert the genuine authority of the teaching office of the church while also insisting that it remains answerable to the Scriptures without making that, in effect, a matter of individual judgement for the believer? Hütter thinks it is not. As a Lutheran theologian, he concluded that private judgement was the only effective authority and that ‘there was no way forward in the direction taken by the Reformation theologians’.⁴⁶ So he moved to Roman Catholicism.

Hütter allows only two choices, submission to infallible councils or private judgement.

The Reformed reply is to argue for a third position, namely that the ecclesial mediation of the faith is ruled by and answerable to the Scriptures, exercising ministerial authority. A non-theological understanding assumes that this arrangement must lead to a clash between the institution and the individual. However, a theological account of church and conscience places both under the authority of Christ in his word taught by his Spirit. This does not eliminate any possibility of a disagreement, since in this age both can err; it offers the prospect of genuine agreement.

⁴⁴ See P.W. Robinson, ‘History and Freedom in Luther’s On the Councils and the Church’, *Concordia Journal* 43, no. 1-2 (2017), 75-87.

⁴⁵ Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing*, pp. 419-20 mentions the fourth Lateran Council and Trent as the obvious examples of council which have erred. The list can be extended, since Protestants will also disagree at least with the teaching of Nicaea II (787) on the veneration of icons; Lateran II (1139) on compulsory clerical celibacy; Lateran IV (1215) on papal primacy; Lyons (1274) on purgatory; Basel - Ferrara - Florence (1431-1445) on papal primacy and Vatican I (1869-1870) on papal infallibility and Marian dogma.

⁴⁶ ‘I was faced by a simple alternative [...] Either I had to bite the bullet and posit—based on my private judgment—the tacit functional infallibility of Luther as the authoritative magisterium [...], or I had to accept the reality of a fallible, collective magisterium made up of sundry Lutheran church leaders, synods, and theologians from whose fallible teachings I would accept what I, according to my own fallible lights, would regard as right.’ R. Hütter, ‘Relinquishing the Principle of Private Judgment in Matters of Divine Truth: A Protestant Theologian’s Journey into the Catholic Church’ *Nova Et Vetera* (English Edition) 9.4 (Fall 2011), p. 877.

Especially it suggests that the individual believer, nurtured by the Church will come to the conviction that the teaching of the Church is a faithful reflection of the Word of God in Scripture. Bannerman argues that 'Ecclesiastical authority in matters of faith as it is given to the Church to administer, and the right of conscience in matters of faith, such as each man must exercise for himself, are opposite, but not irreconcilable forces in the Church system.'⁴⁷

Both Turretin and Bannerman deal with the situation in which a person does not agree with the confession of their church. Turretin calls on someone who finds a fault with the confession of their church to act peacefully and 'refer the difficulties [...] to their church'. The result might be that they 'prefer her public opinion to their own private judgment', or they may need to 'secede from her communion'. Confessions 'cannot bind in the inner court of conscience, except inasmuch as they are found to agree with the word of God', yet he suggests the scenario in which the individual rests in the wisdom of the church.⁴⁸ Not surprisingly, Bannerman in the 19th century considers more fully the right of private judgement. The church has the task and authority to declare Christ's doctrine 'yet it must ever be under reservation of the rights of conscience in the individual, and in subordination, as regards the claims on his belief and submission, to the liberty of private judgment'.⁴⁹

The danger for Protestant theology is that private judgement will overrule church teaching. McGrath has identified the priesthood of all believers as Christianity's dangerous idea.

The dangerous new idea, firmly embodied at the heart of the Protestant revolution, was that all Christians have the right to interpret the Bible for themselves. However, it ultimately proved uncontrollable, spawning developments that few at the time could have envisaged or predicted.⁵⁰

His book is largely a celebration of this dangerous idea, concluding that 'Protestantism possesses a unique and innate capacity for innovation, renewal, and reform based on its own internal resources.'⁵¹ He lauds the diversity and decentralisation of Protestant thought and views the con-

⁴⁷ Bannerman, *Church*, I, p. 289, and see his whole discussion pp. 283-90.

⁴⁸ Turretin, *Institutes*, III, p. 284.

⁴⁹ Bannerman, *Church*, I, p. 283.

⁵⁰ A. McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution—A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First*, (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2007), pp. 2-3.

⁵¹ McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea*, p. 478.

fessional tradition as an unwelcome limitation on that variety.⁵² Vanhoozer, also recognises the generative power of the ‘dangerous idea’ and the Pentecostal plurality of Protestantism, though suggests that the Reformation Solas are sufficient to make Protestantism coherent and, more importantly, faithful to the Lord.⁵³ His approach is less confessional and conciliar than that for which I have been arguing. The implication of my argument is that the private judgement of believers, including and especially the teachers of the church, needs confessional discipline. Reformed theology has a full body of truths with clearer conciliar endorsement and theological retrieval should begin with that confessional tradition. This does not preclude the possibility of confessional revision but places the burden of proof squarely on those who propose revisions.

CONCLUSION

This article has set out theological reasons for Reformed theology to be committed to creeds and confessions as the key guide to interpreting Scripture. It offers a ‘theological theology’ that church confession is part of God’s economy and that the church properly exercises her teaching responsibility and authority with statements prepared and adopted by the councils of teachers. The theologian in the Reformed tradition can receive those thankfully, though they must still consider the range of confessional expressions and the history of confessional revision. There is, of course, another aspect of the case which is to examine the tradition for its harmony with Scripture. For obvious reasons, that is beyond the scope of a single article.

⁵² Discussing the rise of confessional Protestant theology, McGrath comments that the effect was ‘that the Bible tended to be read through’ them, and this led ‘proof-texting’ to support the confessional position, which in turn ‘lessened the influence of the Bible within Protestantism, in that biblical statements were accommodated to existing doctrinal frameworks rather than being allowed to determine them, and even to challenge them’; McGrath, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea*, p. 103. In the conclusion, he contrasts Protestant traditionalism with those who hold that Protestantism ‘locates its identity in its constant self-examination in the light of the Bible and in its willingness to correct itself when it takes wrong turns or situations change’, in ‘a method, not as any one specific historical outcome of the application of that method’. It refuses to ‘regard any past expression of Protestantism as normative’; pp. 464–65.

⁵³ K. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), pp. 230–34.

Reformed theology should grant creeds and confessions a presumptive authority and give greater weight to the conclusions of the councils of the church than to individual opinions. Anyone who wants to differ from the tradition of creeds and confessions accepted by the Reformed tradition must bear the burden of proof to make their case. Familiarity with the confessional tradition (in breadth and depth) should be the *sine qua non* of Reformed theological formation.