

Creeds and confessions are summaries of the doctrine that Christians believe to be taught in the Bible. For instance, if we were to both read the New Testament and you were to ask me to write down what I believe that it teaches about Christ, I might draw up the following 7 point list:

1. Jesus is the only begotten Son of God
2. He was miraculously conceived of God, the Holy Spirit
3. He was born of the Virgin Mary
4. He was crucified, he died, and he was buried
5. On the third day after his crucifixion, he arose bodily from the dead
6. He then ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God, the Father
7. He will come again to judge the living and the dead

If I wanted to be really pedantic, I might write down all the places in Scripture I believe these points are being taught, thus creating 'proof texts' for my list. The above list is essentially the same as the points taught in the Apostles Creed, one of the earliest 'standards' used by the Church to summarize its beliefs.

The word 'creed' comes to us from the Latin 'Credo' or 'I believe' Both creeds and confessions are essentially recapitulations or summaries of the teachings of scripture, but creeds tend to be shorter and far less comprehensive and were usually developed to address particular heresies. The 4th century Nicene Creed, for instance was formulated expressly to combat a Christological heresy called Arianism, which denied the deity of Christ and taught that He was a created being (sadly this belief has been revived by modern day cults such as the Jehovah's Witnesses). Some creeds such as the Apostles Creed (the version we have today dates from the 8th century) were originally intended to be used as statements of faith to be assented to by new believers at their baptism. The church has always had and used creeds as statements of faith -- for instance, the Hebrew shema 'Hear O Israel...' can be considered to be a creed of the OT church. Indeed, only in this age has it become common to assume that handing someone a Bible is a good answer to the question 'what do you believe?'

Most confessions on the other hand, date from the time of the Reformation and are more comprehensive statements intended to survey and reflect all of the important doctrines (particularly those regarding salvation) taught in Scripture.

Confessions tend to divide the teachings of the Bible topically rather than mirroring the Bible's own internal order, and as such they are 'systematic' in their presentation of theology. The presentation of this theology is also from a 'whole Bible' perspective, so a teaching on the nature and attributes of God, for instance, will reflect the completed revelation of the entire canon of Scripture. Because of this, the process of 'proof texting' every doctrine is sometimes difficult if not impossible, because no proof text can sufficiently encompass the whole testimony of the redemptive historical message contained in the Bible. In fact most heresies tend to be tied to one or more proof texts isolated from their larger biblical context.

Confessions are frequently regarded as less important or significant than creeds, because creeds are often viewed as ecumenical reflections of the belief structure of the entire Christian church rather than individual portions of it -- but as the New Dictionary of Theology points out, this argument is less substantial than it may appear:

'In this debate, confessions are often compared to their disadvantage with the creeds, but the contrast is frequently overdrawn. Most confessions were certainly productions of dividing or divided churches, but so was the Chalcedonian Definition. Both confessions and creeds were formed to exclude erroneous beliefs; both were historically conditioned by the heresies they refuted. The creeds' limitations (e.g. none mentions the Lord's Supper; they together contribute little on the atonement) and obscurities (cf. 'descended into hell' in the Apostle's Creed, to say nothing of the technical terms of Nice and Chalcedon) are far more obvious than those of the confessions, which are normally more balanced and thorough. If confessions are more controversial, creeds are more minimal and have in practice lost more completely than confessions their originally basic function as touchstones of orthodoxy. This is however not true of the Apostles' Creed.'

['Confessions of Faith' from New Dictionary of Theology, Ferguson, Wright, & Packer, eds. NP, 1988]

Catechisms, which are often included as part of the standards of a church, were developed to systematically teach biblical doctrine. By memorizing the questions and answers in a catechism, children and adults learn the system of theology the church believes to be the witness of scripture. Catechisms often go into greater detail on specific points than confessions are able to, as is the case with say the extended analysis that the Westminster Larger Catechism devotes to the Lord's Prayer and Ten Commandments.

While Scripture is inerrant and normative because its ultimate author -- God -- is infallible, confessions are the products of fallible men and thus it is entirely possible that they contain error. It should not be assumed that because these men were capable of erring that they necessarily did, however. It is possible, for instance, that the Westminster Confession is an entirely accurate (if not exhaustive) reflection of the doctrine contained in Scripture. But regardless of whether confessions do or do not contain error, only the Holy Scriptures are normative and inspired, and as such confessions must never be viewed as having anything other than a subordinate or secondary role.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of standards is in their value as a means of preserving the unity of the Church. In theory, by concisely setting forth that which the Church as a body believes is taught within Scripture, confessions provide a standard that ensures that the teachings of individual ministers will be in harmony with the witness of scripture and the teachings of their fellow elders. The prospect of schism and heresy is thus minimized and individual believers may grow in knowledge without being tossed to and fro by every contrary wind and wave of doctrine. Teaching will also thus be uniform regardless of which individual church in a communion they happen to be worshipping at. Standards also ensure that worship is uniform and biblical, thus making worship intelligible to individual members regardless of where they happen to be worshipping and preventing the embarrassing possibility that individuals will be prevented by conscience from worshipping in a church within their own denomination.

In modern times the practice of subscription to standards has become increasingly lax in most confessional denominations, and as a result what an individual church member hears in a worship service usually has more to do with the individual beliefs of a Pastor regarding the teachings of the Bible, than the standards he has subscribed to. In a world that places a premium on 'newness' this tends to mean that there is a trend away from 'old fashioned' or 'dogmatic' doctrine and towards new interpretations. It also means that uniformity of worship within a denomination is gradually dissolving as worship in individual churches moves in different directions in accordance with the tastes of the ministers and congregation.

Finally, in looking at Standards, it is important to keep in mind the intention of the authors. When we consider the Westminster Confession, for example, it is good to remember that the individual divines who drafted this great document were not primarily concerned with matters of taste, but rather that they produce a document that was as accurate a reflection of the doctrine they believed the Bible taught as was humanly possible. To this great end they vowed:

'I do seriously promise and vow, in the presence of Almighty God, that in this Assembly whereof I am a member, I will maintain nothing in point of doctrine but what I believe to be most agreeable to the Word of God; nor in point of discipline, but what may make most for God's glory and the peace and good of His Church.'

May our own teaching be ever likewise constrained.

by Andrew Webb