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Before he had completed his lectures on Romans, Luther had developed a way of understanding the Christian life that utterly contradicted what he, and everyone else in his day, had been taught. He flatly denied that there was any possibility of becoming genuinely better in the presence of God. As time passed, Christians could hope only to become ever more radically dependent on the righteousness of God in Christ. But to Luther this was a great and sure hope. "The wounds of Jesus are safe enough for us," he counseled. He found solid hope even for those who had become convinced that God had rejected them. "Thus," he advised, "if anyone is too much afraid that he is not one of the elect . . . let him give thanks for such fear, and rejoice to be afraid, knowing with confidence that the God who says, 'the sacrifice of God is a broken, that is a desperate, heart,' cannot lie." No human works, even the fondest wishes of the most holy, moved God in the slightest. Christ and Christ alone made Christians "perfectly whole in hope."

—James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 99-100.

Unity Among Christians and Subscription to Creeds

Tom Wells

The barriers to unity among Christians are formidable and no one must imagine that solutions that arise from unaided human intellect will overcome them. The problems are spiritual. We are divided because of our sinfulness, and our divisions are one aspect of the loss of objectivity within a fallen race. Yet objectivity eludes us. I have it, of course; who could doubt it! But your inability to see beyond your hastily conceived, narrow convictions guarantees that our minds will never meet! We are doomed to division until a brighter day dawns forever. Why can't you see things my way? Who shall deliver us from this body of conceptual death?

As with other spiritual problems, however, the Scriptures demand our efforts. The fact that a problem arises from sinfulness is a call to attack it with fervor. Individually we must repent of our arrogance in not listening to our brothers and sisters in Christ with sympathy. But corporately . . . what can we do corporately? In this article I will discuss a single barrier to unity. What I want to say may be summarized in two short sentences:

1) Our creeds and confessions are one immense barrier to unity.

2) There is no easy or obvious way to cross this divide.

If my first sentence sounds to you like an indictment against treasured historical and doctrinal landmarks, I simply remind you that one function of creeds is to exclude;

no one should be surprised at this. If the second seems pessimistic, keep in mind that there can be no solution without a frank recognition of the problem created by the documents for which some among us are prepared to die.

Creedal unity has a long and honorable history. Beyond gathering for minor events such as ice cream socials and softball tournaments, whatever the church of Jesus Christ does is done on a doctrinal foundation. The absence of a written creed is no real exception. United effort means the presence of common convictions wherever men and women enter intelligently into labor for the Lord. This is nicely and authoritatively illustrated in the earliest church as seen in the book of Acts. We need not confine their "one mind" (Acts 2:46) to doctrine, to the exclusion of all else, to see that if they did not share the apostles' doctrinal teaching they could not have joined as heartily in the fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer (2:42).

Nor is that all. Paul insists on doctrinal unity in reminding the Ephesians that "There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all" (4:4-6).

Such teaching makes it impossible to think that any and every opinion may be called Christian and used as a basis for united effort.

It is sometimes thought that the Bible itself is a sufficient basis for unity. After all, any doctrine that can be called Christian must finally be traced to the written Word of God. Why not, then, simply rest upon the Scriptures? In recent years we have heard men and women respond to traditional categories like *Calvinist* and *Arminian* with the assertion that they are *Biblicists*. What is wrong with that?

A creedal basis of some greater or lesser degree of precision, written or understood, undergirds all common activity among Christians.

There is nothing wrong with the word Biblicist itself. But what does it mean? If it is the simple assertion, "I believe the Bible!" we may approve it, even applaud it, but we cannot help remembering the large number of cultists who say the same thing with the same eager enthusiasm. If it means more than "I believe the Bible!" then those who unite on it have some common understanding about what the Bible teaches. There is no middle ground here. A creedal basis of some greater or lesser degree of precision, written or understood, undergirds all common activity among Christians. A creed asserts, in the words of a booklet issued by the Free Reformed Churches of North America, that

> We are united, not merely by a vague respect for Scripture, but by a deep-rooted commitment to a common understanding of its message. Our creeds are a declaration of the doctrines which we hold in common.[1]

Groups that have opposed writing down their common convictions have had them nevertheless. And they have held them tenaciously!—witness the so-called Plymouth Brethren and the Churches of Christ.

While the points I have made above are widely accepted, it seems to me that most Christian groups have not given sufficient thought to the difficulties created by our creeds and confessions. There are, to be sure, exceptions to this judgment. At the departure of our Pilgrim forefathers for the new world, their pastor, John Robinson, made a speech described for us by Edward Winslow:

> We were now ere long to part asunder; and the Lord knoweth whether ever he [Robinson] should live to see our faces again. But whether the Lord had appointed it or not; he charged us, before God and his blessed angels, to follow him no further than he followed Christ: and if God should reveal anything to us by any other instrument of his, to be as ready to receive it, as ever we were to receive any truth by his Ministry. For he was very confident the Lord had more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy Word.
>
> He took occasion also miserably to bewail the state and condition of the Reformed [i.e., Protestant] Churches, who were come to a period in religion; and would go no further than the Instruments of their Reformation. As, for example, the Lutherans: they could not be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw, for whatever part of God's will He had further imparted and revealed to Calvin, they will rather die than embrace it. And so also, saith he, you see the Calvinists. They stick where he left them, a misery much to be lamented.[2]

While we recognize that Robinson was speaking of groups of Christians rather than written creeds per se, several things call for comment. First, Robinson himself, though an independent, was no doubt a Calvinist so that this is not a criticism from wholly outside the circle of those he seeks to correct. Second, he believes that there is yet more truth for Christians to discover in God's Word. Unless he thought this further truth would not contradict any tenet already held by Lutherans and Calvinists, a thing very unlikely in

itself, he is implicitly calling for creedal corrections and additions. Third, he thinks he detects an unwillingness among his fellow Protestants to do such correcting and addition. Sadly, history bears out this judgment. Only the slightest changes have been made in most of the creedal forms that arose as a result of the Reformation.

We need not deny the importance of Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon in the providential arrangements of God to see that they have no right to stand between ourselves and God's revelation in His Word.

Let me illustrate the difficulty with the words of Matthaeus Flacius, a sixteenth-century Lutheran:

> Every understanding and exposition of Scripture is to be in agreement with the faith. Such [agreement],is, so to speak, the norm or limit of a sound faith, that we may not be thrust over the fence into the abyss by anything, either by a storm from without or by an attack from within (Rom. 12:6). For everything that is said concerning Scripture, or on the basis of Scripture, must be in agreement with all that the catechism declares or that is taught by the articles of faith.[3]

Several things call for comment here. First is the

demand for all interpretation of Scripture to agree either with the Lutheran catechism or with "the articles of faith," i.e., presumably, the *Augsburg Confession*. For someone standing outside the Lutheran tradition this seems to be a demand to give up *sola scriptura*. We need not deny the importance of Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon in the providential arrangements of God to see that they have no right to stand between ourselves and God's revelation in His Word.

What most of us must see, however, is that this situation is just as egregious if our tradition looks to John Calvin or John Wesley or to the authors of the *Thirty-Nine Articles* or the *Westminster Confession*. In each case we must allow Scripture to speak for itself. As Daniel P. Fuller has written in commenting on Flacius' statement above,

> This statement of Flacius shows how Luther's use of the analogy-of-faith principle had made church tradition, fixed in creeds and catechisms, the key for the interpretation of scripture. Even though this tradition was now of a Protestant rather than of a Roman Catholic variety, yet the barrier which it erected against letting biblical exegesis improve or correct that tradition was exceedingly hard to surmount.[4]

Christians of all persuasions must seek to take this seriously. What has developed in church history is the claim that Scripture alone is our standard, joined to the quiet and often unrecognized co-principle that our confessions are the traditions by which we must read God's Word.

We must also examine Flacius' reference to Romans 12:6. There Paul has written, "And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion (*analogian*) of his faith." Commentators are divided on the understanding of "the proportion [or analogy] of faith,"

but even if we take it as a standard to which all exegesis must conform, it is clear that it must be a standard that existed prior to Paul's writing of Romans. That does not mean that there could be no growth in it as more of the New Testament was written, but to suppose that it conforms exactly to one of the post-Reformation confessions strains credulity beyond reasonable limits. Again, on the assumption that a standard is in view, the most it may demand of us is to understand more obscure Scripture in the light of what is clearer and simpler. (This is, in fact, the way the phrase "the analogy of faith" has often been used in church history.)

While the confessions have tended to control our understanding of Scripture, something even less frequently recognized has added to our difficulty. At least until the present century, our conservative systematic theologies have tended to be expositions of the confessions even when that was not immediately apparent. The reason for this is not far to seek: the systematic theologian doing the writing was usually already bound to a confession by being a member or theologian of a confessional church. He could keep neither his credentials as a minister nor his post as a theological professor if he varied appreciably from the confession of his church.

This does not mean—and I do not want to be understood as saying—that such men compromised their convictions for the sake of their positions. I have no way of knowing their motives and, more than that, I am an admirer of the men in my theological tradition. It does mean, however, that they were producing theological works that did very little to question confessional stances, however pure their motives may have been.

Now you will see immediately how all of this bears on unity among believers. Surely we must unite on truth, but as I wrote earlier, the confessions and creeds are a barrier

between us. This is what we might have expected, but that is not all. The little impact that Lutherans have had on Calvinists, and vice versa, bears witness that some constraint has kept them from freely and openly working to eliminate their differences in the last 300 years. Creedal statements were intended to unite, but also to exclude, and they have succeeded on both fronts. Is there a single substantive area in which Lutherans have convinced their Calvinistic brothers? Has any change been made in the Lutheran confessions of the last 300 years that demonstrates the cordial embrace of any Calvinistic idea? Is it any consolation for those who long for unity among believers in Christ, that each side can say, "But we are right!"? Each side—and every other side that may reasonably be called Christian—has had the responsibility before God to strive for unity in a scriptural way. Can anyone doubt that the large measure of failure can be traced, humanly speaking, to strict subscription to creeds? On the other hand, it is with heavy heart that I admit that finding a solution to this problem is more difficult than simply describing it. I have shown earlier that the abandonment of creedal statements cannot be the cure-all. Too much is at stake.

What can we do? The central matter is that those who study the Scriptures must have liberty to follow them wherever they may lead. How can we obtain such liberty in a creedal world?

The possibilities, it seems to me, must lie somewhere along the following lines. None of these solutions will commend itself to everyone, but we need to consider them.

1) A major simplification of our creeds. I have already alluded to the large number of confessions upheld by Lutherans. But we must not think of them as exceptional. A number of Calvinistic denominations subscribe to the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the *Belgic Confession*, the *Heidelberg Catechism* and the

Canons of Dort. Other groups subscribe to fewer creeds, but their confessions of faith are lengthy and detailed. Each group must seriously ask itself if all this detail is necessary.

2) A looser subscription to creedal statements. Would anyone today defend the following subscription terms that the French churches adopted in 1620?

> I N[ame]. N[ame]. do Swear and Protest before God, and this Holy Assembly that I do receive, approve and embrace [sic] all the Doctrines taught and decided by the Synod of Dort, as perfectly agreeing with the Word of God, and the Confession of our Churches. I swear and Promise to persevere in the Profession of this Doctrine during my whole life, and to defend it with the utmost of my power, and that I will never, neither by Preaching nor Teaching in the Schools, nor by Writing depart from it.[5]

Certainly "loose" subscription is preferable to swearing never to change one's mind in one's "whole life"! The problem here, of course, is "How loose is loose?" If this looseness is defined in detail, the result is likely to be a slightly smaller confession to which all must strictly subscribe! Yet in the past, some groups have apparently found a way to do this. Let me cite one illustration, the Baptists of the Philadelphia Association, who subscribed to the *Philadelphia Confession* (a slight variant of the 1689 or *Second London Confession*). Each year this association issued a circular letter to all the churches. The following is taken from the letter of 1798, titled *Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day*.

> [I]t is to be wished that all Christians were unanimous on this subject; but there is little hope of this being the case, till we drop all traditions and traditional modes of speech; for these things will cause many mistakes.

> The compilers of our confession of faith were desirous to use the same language with other Christians, as far as was thought consistent with a good conscience; and it may be, on this subject, they conformed more than can be supported by the Holy Scriptures, or any arguments justly drawn from them. . . . [W]e proceed to show that the fourth command was not moral, notwithstanding it is sometimes placed with moral commands. . . .[6]

As suggested by his own words, the writer, David Jones, goes on to argue against the language of his confession, showing that in at least one important respect he was a loose subscriptionist.

3) Encouragement for change within the confessions themselves. Perhaps our confessions of faith must include more than a general statement that all writings of uninspired men are bound to err. Perhaps in addition they must contain a statement to the effect that *this confession itself* falls under this general condemnation. And perhaps they must last of all include a statement of willingness to be reproved from Scripture that quite evidently expects to have that done. When the confessions of men genuinely challenge others to question them without fear of consequences, then we will have arrived at confessions that demand our respect in a new way. At least one solid gain would come from such an approach. Questions about the truth or falsity of statements in the confessions would now come from within the groups of adherents. Of those men who think they find a flaw in their confessions, who is better to raise questions: the man whose integrity now forces him to abandon them when he agrees with most of what is written, or the man who stays within the group of adherents and keeps his reservations to himself? Can there be any doubt as to the answer to this question?

4) To be creative let's invent something on the spur of

the moment. It may be that a denomination, an association or even a local church could rate deviations from its standards as to the degree of departure it will tolerate. In this scenario each item in the confession would be awarded a score. A few basic matters would be awarded an "N" for non-negotiable. The rest would be rated from one to ten, ten representing the most important matters. If a member or deacon or elder compiled a score of, say, more than fifty, he would be excluded, unless he could persuade the others of the rightness of at least part of his cause, enough to get him down below fifty again! Ridiculous? Maybe, but this problem must find a solution!

5) Some combination of the above.

It may be that none of these solutions commends itself to you. That is all right, if you will expend your time and effort to address the problem.

Is there any hope that a solution to this problem will be found? We are not the first generation to recognize the difficulty. In 1787 J.P. Gabler attacked dogmatic (systematic) theology with being far removed from Scripture. He proposed that going back to studying the text of Scripture was the way ahead. Systematics must rest on biblical texts.

The first part of Gabler's proposal, the rupturing of the link between biblical study and confessional application, was soon widely adopted, but the second part, that the results of such biblical theology should then be deployed in the construction of dogmatics, was largely ignored. . . . [As a result] the drift of biblical theology was toward the increasingly atomistic, cut off from any obligation to traditional dogmatics.[7]

Once again we are seeing a revival of biblical or exegetical theology, a searching for the meaning of texts and books and testaments prior to or, more accurately, accompanying systematization. This time many conservatives and evangelicals are at the forefront of the effort. We must not

let this opportunity be lost. The presence of strict subscription to creeds fosters fear, fear of being ostracized, in men who might otherwise tackle this problem. At first, questioning a creedal statement will require godly courage in such groups, but when done intelligently and prayerfully it will be worth the cost. The fearful trend in our day is to follow the battle cry: "Love Unites, but Doctrine Divides!" Certainly we must emphasize love . . . and unashamedly! I would like to think that this paper is such a plea. But if this one-sided slogan were to prevail, it would mean the abandonment of truth in the church of Jesus Christ. Yet experience suggests that, humanly speaking, the fear inspired by our creedal stances keeps us from pursuing unity, both in love and in truth.

As I began this paper I set before you the facts we must wrestle with:

1) Our creeds and confessions are one immense barrier to unity.

2) There is no easy or obvious way to cross this divide.

Neither of these two things has changed in the time it took you to read this article. Perhaps, then, you will want to join me in this brief prayer: "May God grant us a marriage between exegesis and systematic theology resulting in greater unity in understanding His Word."

Is this too much to hope for? Not at all, given the nature of our God who holds men and opinions in His mighty hands. The truth is certain to prevail, but it will not do so automatically, without God-inspired effort. He will use sinful humans, opposing their own sinful subjectivity, to do His work.

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Notes

1. *Introducing the Free Reformed Churches of North America* (St. Thomas, Ontario: Free Reformed Publications, 1996), 15.
2. The quotation comes from Edward Winslow, *Hypocrisie Unmasked*, (London, 1646). It is found in Walter H. Burgess, *John Robinson: Pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers, A Study of His Life and Times* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1920), 239-40. (This reference was kindly provided to me by Michael Haykin.)
3. *The Book of Concord* (1580) contains a number of documents going back to the Apostles' Creed that might be described as "articles of faith" by Lutherans, but Flacius wrote this in 1567. He may have intended much more than the *Augsburg Confession*, however. In addition to a number of creeds from the early church, other candidates for articles of faith include the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* (1531), the *Smalcald Articles* (1537) and the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* (1537), all of which appear in the later *Book of Concord*. It is plain to see that if any of these were also in Flacius' mind, it complicates the problem immensely, especially in the view of someone outside the Lutheran tradition.
4. Both the quotation from Flacius and Fuller's comment are taken from Robert A. Guelich, ed., *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans,1978), article: "Biblical Theology and the Analogy of Faith," 198.
5. Quoted in Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvin and the Amyraut Heresy* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, 1969), 134.
6. Norbert Ward, editor, *Beloved Brethren: Circular Letters of the Philadelphia Baptist Association from 1774 to 1807* (Nashville, Tennessee: Baptist Reformation Review, n.d. [ca 1970s]). Though Ward was editor, the chapter from which the quotation was taken apparently has no editorial work within, since it seems plainly to be photocopied from a nineteenth-century page.
7. D.A. Carson, "New Testament Theology," *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1997), 796.