

Confessions Then and Now

The enduring value of creeds and confessions

An address given at the God's Glory Our Joy Conference 2006.

I've been asked to speak at this session on the subject of *confessions then and now*. In case any of you came under a false impression, no I'm not suggesting that we should troop off to a priest during the lunchtime interval to confess our sins. It isn't that sort of confession we have in mind. I'm talking this morning about confessions of faith: summaries of Christian teaching adopted by a church or group of churches as an official statement of what they believe. We tend to use the phrase *confessions* if they're long statements, twenty, thirty, forty, pages. We tend to use the word *creed* if they're short statements, a couple of pages long. But the two terms really mean the same thing: summaries of what we believe. Some of the greatest confessions take the form of catechisms; that's to say, instead of just putting it all down in direct statements, they do it in question and answer form. So when I talk about creeds and confessions today, I'm including catechisms.

Let me begin with two quotes. One of them is from a well-known Bible-teacher from the first half of the 20th century, Campbell Morgan, (1863-1945). He wrote this: *'No man who is living in true fellowship with God will consent to be mastered mentally by any creed that ever yet was prepared for him. The proportion in which a man knows the high life of fellowship with God, is the proportion in which he knows that no creed his brother may write for him, no creed he may write for himself, can be final. No man or company of men, no Church living in true fellowship with God will consent that its policy be stereotyped...'* ¹ Clearly, Campbell Morgan didn't like creeds and confessions. As far as he's concerned, no Christian should ever put his name to any man-made creed and say, 'yes I bind myself to uphold its teaching'.

Here's the second quotation. This is Benjamin Warfield, another great evangelical Bible teacher who lived through almost the same period as Campbell Morgan. His dates are 1851 to 1921. This is what he wrote, *'He who wishes to grow strong in his religious life, let him, I say, next to the Bible, feed himself on the great Creeds of the Church. There is a force of religious inspiration in them which you will seek in vain elsewhere. And this for good reasons. First, because it is ever true that it is by the truth that sanctification is wrought. And next, because the truth is set forth in these Creeds with a clearness and richness with which it is set forth nowhere else.'* He calls them the *'compressed and weighted utterances of the Christian heart'* and goes on to say that the great creeds and confessions *'have in them more food for your spiritual life - are "more directly, richly and evangelically devotional" - than any other book, apart from the Bible, in existence...'* The Reformed creeds, he goes on to say, are *'charged with blessing to those who will read and meditate on their rich deposit of religious truth...'* ²

For Campbell Morgan the 'high life of fellowship with God' can never be found except by shaking off the tyranny of creeds and confessions. For Benjamin Warfield the great creeds and confessions are the richest and most powerful devotional reading you'll ever find.

Well, who do you agree with? Are you a Campbell Morgan man or a Benjamin Warfield man? Or do you think you're somewhere in between?

I grew up in a Campbell Morgan world, a world without creeds or confessions. I don't suppose I had ever heard of the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed until I was in my late teens. As far as I know, I'd never heard them read, or sat with a congregation which recited them together in public worship. I'd never seen a copy of the Westminster Shorter Catechism or the 1689 confession. If Campbell Morgan were right, there shouldn't have been a Christian on the planet who had a higher life of fellowship with God than myself... I'd certainly never been mastered by any written creed! I was blissfully ignorant that such things even existed.

The sort of churches I went to tended to be very suspicious of theology or doctrine. I heard it very often. 'We don't need theology: we just believe the Bible.' Many of the preachers I heard were proud of the fact that they hadn't had any theological training. 'I don't need theologians to tell me what to believe: I just preach what the Bible says'. And so it's not surprising that they had no time for creeds and confessions. I can remember an episode from my late teens. At that time I was just beginning to come across Christians who did think summaries of doctrine were important. Well I remember speaking to the pastor of one church and asking if the church had any statement of what it believed. And he looked at me rather disapprovingly and said, 'no we would never accept such a thing, we just preach the Bible...'

That church - and most of the other churches I knew as a child - didn't have any written list of the doctrines they held to. They boasted that they were free from such bondage. But of course, what they didn't realise was that they *did* have a very definite list of doctrines. The list was just never written down. But the church did have doctrines from which it never deviated. If you wanted to be accepted in that church you had to hold those doctrines. The church held to the doctrine that the Bible was God's Word and that it was true. It held to the doctrine that man was sinful and needed to be saved. It held to the doctrine that Jesus was the Son of God. It held to the doctrine that Jesus died for the sins of every human being without exception. It held to the doctrine that to be saved a person must pray a prayer accepting Christ. It held to the doctrine that every human being has free will and can accept or refuse salvation. It held to the doctrine that to become holy, Christians must stop making any effort and must rest on Christ to sanctify them. It held to the doctrine that there's going to be a secret rapture, and then a period of tribulation and then another public coming of Christ and then a thousand year earthly kingdom. These were the fixed doctrines of that church.

If anybody had come to the church and had preached anything that contradicted these doctrines, he wouldn't have been invited back. If anybody who attended the church had started lending round books that taught anything different, he would have been very firmly told he couldn't do it. The church did have a completely fixed system of doctrine. But it was simply one that the pastor had drawn up, without even realising it, off his own bat. It was simply a summary of what *he* believed. And because he had already written off all the theologians of the past, he couldn't even compare his system of doctrine with what other Christians have taught. He had no idea whether what he was saying was what Christians have believed down through the centuries. He simply took it for granted that everything he believed was what the Bible clearly taught and that all real Christians had always believed the same things he believed. He

had nothing to measure his own system of doctrine against.

You can see how terribly vulnerable a church like that was. By saying ‘we don’t need to bother with doctrines and theology and confessions of faith’ the church members were really agreeing to treat their pastor as infallible. They accepted that his interpretation of the Bible must simply be right at every point. And neither he nor they had any benchmark to measure whether what he found in the Bible was what Christians have always found in the Bible, or whether it was some novelty that he had picked up along the way.

I think that was the thing I realised back then when I was struggling with these things. The question isn’t whether a church should have a confession of faith or not. Every church *does* have a confession of faith: a list of the things they allow to be taught. Either there’s a written list or an unwritten list. The only question is whether the confession of faith they have is a good one or not: whether the doctrines they stand for are based on sound interpretation of the Bible; whether their system of doctrine is balanced; whether it’s clear and precise; whether it’s well-expressed.

And I began to realise that it’s very unlikely that the pastor or leaders of any local church are actually going to do a better job working out their system of faith all on their own, than all the churches and bible-teachers have done down through the centuries when they’ve drawn up the great creeds and confessions.

Let’s imagine a pastor and he’s preaching about Jesus. He wants to make clear who Jesus is. But he’s determined not to consult what anybody else has said. He insists he’s not going to be bound by any creed. He’s just going to preach what he can see in the Bible. Well I hope he sees some things clearly. I hope he sees clearly the truth that Jesus is indeed God’s Son. And I hope he sees clearly that Jesus is indeed truly human. One man with an open Bible - even when all he has is an English translation - can glimpse great and glorious things.

But is that man, working on his own, likely to come to the same depth and fullness of understanding as the 318 Holy Fathers who gathered at Nicaea in 325 AD and spent those months searching together the Word of God? And then the 150 Fathers who gathered at Constantinople? These were the men who formulated the Nicene creed in its different forms. They had lived through a time when the doctrine of the Person of Christ was under attack from every quarter; they had had to wrestle with all sorts of deviations and heresies dreamed up by deceitful human hearts. They had had to search every verse of the New Testament, every shade of meaning. And finally gathered in those great councils with Christians and churches all over the world praying that God would give them help, they put down on paper words that had to be so exact, so balanced. Then, in 451 AD, the great Council of Chalcedon was summoned. Leaders of churches from West and East - 500 in all - gathered and took up the work, examined new and even subtler heresies that had emerged since the earlier councils and finally building on the earlier creeds, drew up the Creed of Chalcedon. Has that pastor really nothing to learn from all the work they put in together?

I’m not denying that that one pastor with his AV or NIV open in front of him may have real insight into the Word of God. I’m not denying that the Bible and only the Bible has ultimate authority. But don’t you think that our friend might just have

learned something by listening to the hundreds of men who prayed and studied and debated and searched together to discover exactly what the Bible teaches about the Person of Christ? Don't you think that a church might be enriched by learning not just from their pastor but from what all those men working together put down as a summary of what they thought was vitally important?

Isn't there just a tad of arrogance when Christians say, 'we need no creed, no confession, we can go it alone... we can safely ignore all the work and wisdom of the men whom God has raised up in the past'?

Well does the Bible itself give us any encouragement to draw up and use statements of faith, creeds, confessions? I believe so.

The Bible itself makes plain that God's people need concise, clear summaries of key truths. We find such summaries in the Old Testament, given by God to his people: *'Hear O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart and with all thy soul and with all thy might. And these words that I command you today shall be upon thine heart and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house and when thou walkest by the way and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. Thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the doorposts of thy house, and upon thy gates'* (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

God gave his people hundreds of commands, detailed, complicated commands for every situation. But those hundreds of commands he condensed down to ten commands which everyone could learn, which could become the centre of national life. Ten commandments, written on just two tablets of stone. But then even those ten commands he reduces to two sentences and says, *'Hear o Israel'* - it's all here summed up in two sentences - listen! *'The LORD your God the Lord is one. Love him with all your heart and soul and might'*. What a marvellous summary of God's truth! Every Israelite had to memorise it, pass it on to their children, bind it on their hand and forehead, write it on their doorpost. It was the first great confession of faith. Pious Jews still recite it daily.

In New Testament times, it was very much part of Jewish culture that teachers shaped their teaching into a set form of words which could be passed on from generation to generation. That was the way the rabbis taught in Jesus's time - men like Hillel, Shammai, Gamaliel. They taught their disciples systematically. They presented their teaching in clear, concise forms so that their disciples could memorise it. There was no place for vague or wordy comments: everything had to be as pointed and concise as possible. And the rabbi would repeat the teaching in the set words over and over until his pupils had memorised it. Some of those pupils would go on to become teachers, rabbis themselves. And then what was their task? It was to pass on the same teaching, in the same words, to the next generation. Maybe they would add something extra. Maybe they would modify some statement. Maybe they would adapt the wording a little. But basically they passed on the same teaching in the same words from one generation to the next. They called the blocks of materials that they passed on the *traditions*. Each generation would *receive* the traditions from the past generation and *deliver* them to the next. Those were the two key words used to describe this generation to generation passing on of teaching - to *receive* and to

deliver. You *received* the set block of teaching from your predecessors; you *delivered* - passed it on - to your successors in turn.

Now when you read the New Testament - the gospels, the letters - you realise that the apostles adopted just the same approach as the Jewish rabbis before them. They still talked about *receiving* and *delivering* traditions from one generation to the next. Paul says things like this: '*We command you brothers in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the **tradition** you **received** from us*' (2 Thessalonians 3:6). Well, anyone with a Jewish background would have understood straightaway what that meant. During the short time Paul was in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-10) he had taught his converts a block of material. They had **received** this **tradition**; they were supposed to memorise it, act on it, and then deliver it to others. You have the same idea in 1 Cor 11 vs 2: '*I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered to you...*' Again Paul has *delivered* to them fixed *traditions*: blocks of teaching in set words. Now he commends them because they have maintained those traditions. You get just the same idea in lots of other places in Paul's letters.

So do you get the picture of how Paul taught the different churches? Yes he exhorted churches in a spontaneous way; he proclaimed the truth; he discussed things and responded to questions, but he also delivered to the churches set blocks of material: teaching presented according to the Jewish pattern of instruction. He taught the key facts of the Christian faith in set forms which he called the traditions. The hearers were expected to memorise them, and to be able to reproduce them at a later stage. Yes of course those key facts had to be explained and taken to heart but the starting point was this, that the set teaching - the '*form of sound words*' (2 Timothy 1:13) was *delivered* and *received*.

Let me show you some examples in the New Testament of the blocks of teaching that were passed on in a set form. Here's 1 Corinthians ch 11 vs 23: '*I received from the Lord what I delivered (or passed on) to you*'. And then Paul goes on to tell the story of the last supper. Now he says he's *received* that story from the Lord. He doesn't mean that the Lord directly revealed it to him from heaven. He means that he received it by a chain of receiving and passing on that went right back to the Lord himself. The disciples who were there in the upper room with the Lord passed on what they heard and saw in a set form to others; they received it and then passed it on in their turn. Paul had received it either from the first disciples or from others who had received it from them. And then Paul passed on to the Corinthians what he himself had received. That's why Paul's account of the Last Supper is almost identical in its wording with the accounts in the gospels. Paul doesn't feel free to deviate from the set wording which had been passed down. Wherever people told the story of the Last Supper they told it in a set form of words which had been passed down from Jesus through the apostles to all the different churches.

You've got the same thing in 1 Corinthians ch 15 vs 1-8. Paul reminds the Corinthians that they *received* the gospel. '*Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you **received***' (vs 1). Again it's this technical word. It means that the gospel was delivered to them in a fixed form. And now Paul reminds them that it's important that they hold on to the message exactly as he preached it to them: '*...the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which*

you stand and by which you are being saved if you hold fast to the word I preached to you'. And then in vs 3, he lays out the precise words that he used. He introduces them in this way: *'I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received...'* He's very definite, isn't he? He says that he received this truth from others; he insists he delivered it to them unchanged. Yes, the gospel dawned on Paul when the glory of Jesus was revealed to him on the road to Damascus, but the precise words in which he passed that gospel on to the church in Corinth were words he received from others. What were they? *'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures... he was buried... he rose again according to the Scriptures.... he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve...than to five hundred brothers...'* And so on. Paul didn't invent this list. He's just passing on the *tradition he received*.

Who first drew up this little summary of the key facts of the gospel? Was it the twelve together? Was it James who led the church in Jerusalem? We don't know. All we know is that it was agreed that this was the set form of words to be used from generation to generation to teach the facts about Jesus's death, burial and resurrection. Even Paul the infallible apostle used that set form of words to teach the Corinthian church. He didn't have to improvise. He had this lovely summary, clear, crisp, rhythmical, easy to memorise. He could pass it on to the next generation. All he needed to do was to make one addition: *'Last of all, he appeared to me also...'* (vs 8). Paul brings the tradition right up to date by adding the story of his own encounter with the risen Christ.

You've got lots of other examples in the New Testament letters of clear, crisp summary statements which were passed on from one preacher to another. *'The gospel concerning God's Son - descended from David according to the flesh, designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead'* (Romans 1:3-4).

'Remember: Jesus Christ risen from the dead, descended from David - this is my gospel'. (2 Timothy). Why does Paul start with the word 'remember'? Because this is something Timothy has already memorised. It a one sentence summary of Paul's gospel, which he expected others to remember.

In 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, Paul quotes four *sayings*. Clearly they were already in circulation before Paul quoted them and thus made them part of Holy Scripture. He declares them to be *faithful* - trustworthy. He says they are *'deserving of full acceptance...'*: in other words, they deserve to be known and used by believers everywhere.

'The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.' (1 Timothy 1:15).

'The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task...' (1 Timothy 3:1).

'Being justified by grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life: the saying is trustworthy...' (Titus 3:7-8).

'The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him we shall live with him.'

*If we endure, we shall reign with him.
If we deny him he will deny us.
He cannot deny himself, he remains faithful...'
(2 Timothy 2:11-12).*

Every Christian could learn that little four line summary of God's promises.

Now I hope you see the picture. In one sense we know very little about the years between the birth of the Church at Pentecost and the completing of the writing of the New Testament. But what is clear is that during that time, the apostles and their followers were already drawing up clear concise summaries of Christian truth: basic facts about Jesus's life and death, statements of basic Christian doctrines. And they were passing them on to the churches and the churches were expected to know them and then to pass them on to the next generation. They must guard them and uphold them and teach them. Paul tells Timothy that he must preserve the form of sound words which he received from Paul.

Now you can see what we're saying. We're saying that Christians need exact summaries of key truths. They need to have them in a set form which people can learn and teach. Otherwise Paul and the other apostles wouldn't have produced such summaries in their day.

Now of course the summaries that have been drawn up since then don't have the same total authority as the summaries which the apostles drew up. The apostles were infallible. They were foundation stones for the whole church. The bishops who met at Nicaea or Chalcedon or the theologians who met at Dordt or the elders who met at the Westminster Assembly weren't infallible. So we don't treat any of the creeds and confessions as having the same total authority as Scripture.

But we still treat them with great respect. After all, Scripture promises that God will raise up people in his church with special gifts, including gifts of teaching. Well, if the Lord in his providence makes it possible for hundreds of the teachers he's raised up to meet together to discuss some point, then surely we ought to take what they say very seriously.

And more so, because these men were representatives of churches. The great creeds and confessions weren't just drawn up by professional scholars. They were drawn up by leaders of churches. Why is that significant? Well, because the Bible encourages churches to meet together when there's some issue that needs resolving. In Acts chapter 15, people from different churches came together to Jerusalem to discuss a knotty theological question. And at the end, they were able to agree an answer to the question, and they could issue a statement on the matter, and they could say, '*It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...*' (Acts 15: 28). They were sure that the Holy Spirit had guided them in drawing up their statement. And then they sent it round the churches and they expected the churches to respect it. The Holy Spirit is present when representatives from different churches gather and try together to draw up a statement of what they believe.

And that's how the great creeds and confessions have come into being. Take the Synod of Dort. Fifty-six Dutch ministers and ruling elders came together. They were joined by representatives of evangelical churches from eight other European countries.

They came together and sought to discover from God's Word the truth about the plan of salvation and then to put it down on paper as clearly as they possibly could for the benefit of all the churches. Well don't you believe that God was there with them? Don't you believe that we ought at least to respect the summary of Christian doctrine that those godly men drew up together?

Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit will '*lead you into all truth*' (John 16:13). But who's the 'you'? Is it just you on your own, individually? Or was he promising that the Holy Spirit would lead the church step by step into all truth? And isn't it part of that process that he brings churches together at key points in history to search the Scriptures and to come to a common mind on the great doctrines of the faith, and to set them down in a form that we can still build on today?

How do we use the great creeds and confessions today? Well we use them in all sorts of different ways. But let me just suggest four.

Firstly, ministers should use them when they're preaching. There are times when it's appropriate for a pastor to work through one of the great confessions in a series of sermons. That way he makes sure that the congregation understands the whole sweep of Christian doctrine and how it all fits together. Do you know what the very first book was that the Banner of Truth Trust published? It was called *A Body of Divinity* and it was a series of sermons by a Puritan preacher called Thomas Watson on the first part of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. And then the Banner published another two volumes *The Ten Commandments* and *The Lord's Prayer*. Together they make up a complete commentary on the Shorter Catechism.³ Well you might think they would be terribly tedious and dry. But I challenge you to try them. And you'll find that they're so racy and fascinating. It is possible to preach through the great confessions of faith and to make it genuinely exciting. But even when a minister isn't preaching right through one of the confessions, I think he's wise if he just quotes them from time to time. Why? Well partly just to make it clear that what he's saying isn't some novel idea that he's just dreamed up; rather it's what Christians in the past together agreed the Bible was teaching. And so often, a sentence from one of the great confessions will sum up a whole line of teaching in a wonderfully succinct, precise way. If I preach about the reason why we exist, I don't expect many of my sentences will be so memorable that everyone will be able to quote them afterwards. But if I say, '*What is the chief end of man?*' and if I answer, '*Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever*', that sums up everything I want to say in a way that everyone can remember.

Secondly, we should use the confessions and creeds to prepare folk who are coming into membership in our churches, especially if they're folk who are coming from an evangelical background but one that's different from our own. Our congregation in Stockport is committed to the 1689 confession. Now if we were bringing into membership someone from a Pentecostal or charismatic background, I would think it a very wise thing to do to take that person through the section of the confession which deals with the sufficiency of Scripture. '*The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressedly set down or necessarily contained in the holy scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or traditions of men*'. The confession declares that the Holy Scriptures are '*most necessary, those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now*

ceased'. So I could say to this man, 'Look: this was what all evangelical Baptist churches agreed the Bible taught, three hundred years ago. And that's still where we stand as a church'. If I were talking to someone from a dispensational background, I could take them through what the confession says about the second coming of Christ. It was written 150 years before dispensationalism was dreamed of, yet it had already dealt with all the issues that were going to come up to confuse people.

Thirdly, we should use the confessions - and perhaps especially the catechisms - for the teaching of the young both in church and in home. That's what many of the great catechisms were produced for: so that children could learn Bible doctrine in simple, easily memorised form. If you want your children to grow up not just with a pile of disjointed bits of knowledge in the head, but with a systematic understanding of what the Bible teaches, there's no better way of doing it than by teaching them one or another catechism. There are catechisms for people in every age group and at every level. This is the little *Mother's Catechism* prepared by John Willison in 1732:

**Who made you?
God.**

**Who is that redeems you?
Jesus Christ.**

**Who it that sanctifies you?
The Holy Ghost.**

**Of what were you made?
Of dust.**

**What doth that teach you?
To be humble and mindful of death.⁴**

While this is *A Catechism for Boys and Girls*:

**Who made you?
God made me?**

**What else did God make?
God made all things.**

**Why did God make you and all things?
For his own glory.**

**How can you glorify God?
By loving him and doing what he commands.**

**Why ought you to glorify God?
Because he made me and cares for me.⁵**

And then of course, there's the greatest catechism of all, prepared for children and young people: the *Shorter Westminster Catechism*. To help you teach it to youngsters,

I'd recommend Dorothy Anderson's workbook on the Shorter Catechism published by the Banner of Truth⁶ or the more recent book by Dennis Hustedt: *Firm in the Faith*, published by Evangelical Press.⁷

And fourthly and most important of all, the creeds and confessions should be used to nourish our own spiritual lives. I quoted Benjamin Warfield at the beginning. What did he say again? *'There is more food for your spiritual life in them - they are more directly, richly and evangelically devotional, than any book, apart from the Bible, in existence'*. And he's right. You can chew on a single sentence from one of the great catechisms or confessions and you'll find that you're devouring pure Kendal mint cake - a thousand calories in every mouthful. Or you'll find you're chewing the finest biltong - enough food in every ounce to sustain you through long days in the desert. Get to know the great confessions of faith. Buy the Shorter Catechism - it's only a little booklet - and you will find more spiritual benefit from it than from a thousand of the latest Christian bestsellers.

In our last few minutes, I want to give you some bitesized pieces from different creeds and confessions. Maybe they'll whet your appetite.

From the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

What is God?

God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

How long could you spend chewing on that? *'God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth'*. You could spend half an hour a day for a week just meditating on those seven words - the being of God, the wisdom of God, the power of God, the holiness of God, the justice of God, the goodness of God, the truthfulness of God: God is *infinite, eternal, and unchangeable* in them all.⁸

From Luther's Small Catechism:

I believe in God the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

What does this mean?

I believe that God has created me and all that exists; that he has given me and still preserves to me body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my limbs, my reason and all my senses; and also clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and child, land, cattle, and all my property; that he provides me richly and daily with all the necessities of life, protects me from all danger, and preserves and guards me from all evil; and all this out of pure paternal, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine; for all of which I am in duty bound to thank, praise, serve, and obey him. This is most certainly true.⁹

You can read through that paragraph in sixty seconds but it will give you a programme for praise and thanksgiving that will last the rest of your life.

From the Westminster Larger Catechism:

What are the duties required of in the first commandment?

The duties required in the first commandment are, the knowing and acknowledging of God to be the only true God, and our God; and to worship and glorify him accordingly, by thinking, meditating, remembering, highly esteeming, honouring, adoring, choosing, loving, desiring, fearing of him; believing him; trusting, hoping, delighting, rejoicing in him; being zealous for him; calling upon him, giving all praise and thanks, and yielding all obedience and submission to him with the whole man; being careful in all things to please him, and sorrowful when in any thing he is offended; and walking humbly with him.¹⁰

From the Belgic Confession of 1561:

We believe that the same God, after he had created all things, did not forsake them or give them up to fortune and chance, but that he rules and governs them according to his holy will, so that nothing happens in this world without his appointment; nevertheless God neither is the author of, nor can he be charged with, the sins which are committed. For his power and goodness are so great and incomprehensible, that he orders and executes his work in the most excellent and just manner even when the devil and wicked men act unjustly. And as to what he doth surpassing human understanding we will not curiously enquire into it further than our capacity will admit of; but with the greatest humility and reverence adore the righteous just judgments of God which are hid from us, contenting ourselves that we are Christ's disciples, to learn only those things which he has revealed to us in his Word without transgressing those limits.

This doctrine affords us unspeakable consolation, since we are taught thereby that nothing can befall us by chance, but by the direction of our most gracious and heavenly Father, who watches over us with a paternal care, keeping all creatures so under his power that not a hair of our head (for they are all numbered), nor a sparrow, can fall to the ground, without the will of our Father, in whom we do entirely trust; being persuaded that he so restrains the devil and all our enemies, that, without his will and permission, they can not hurt us..."¹¹

From the Canons of the Synod of Dort:

Man was originally formed after the image of God. His understanding was adorned with a true and saving knowledge of his Creator, and of spiritual things; his heart and will were upright, all his affections pure, and the whole man was holy. But, revolting from God by the instigation of the devil and by his own free will, he forfeited these excellent gifts; and in the place thereof became involved in blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity, and perverseness of judgment; became wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will, and impure in his affections...

Therefore all men are conceived in sin, and are by nature children of wrath, incapable of saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto; and without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, they are neither able nor willing to return to God, to reform the depravity of their nature, or to dispose themselves to reformation.¹²

And then back to the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

Who is the Redeemer of God's elect?

The only Redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continueth to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, forever.¹³

From the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563:

What is thy only comfort in life and in death?

That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ, who with His precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me, that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must work together for my salvation. Wherefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready henceforth to live unto Him.¹⁴

And finally from the Confession of Faith of the Calvinistic Methodists, 1823:

But as to the godly, they shall go, at the gracious call of the Judge, into life eternal. This will be a life perfectly free from sin and all its consequences; and it will bring with it the full fruition of all happiness, glory, and consolation that human nature made perfect is capable of enjoying. This glory will essentially consist in beholding the glory of the Lord shining in all the perfections of his nature, in enjoying his peace without ceasing, in admiring and loving him, rejoicing in him, serving him and becoming like him; and its endless duration will be the crown of its excellence. Various expressions are used in Scripture to set forth the eternal glory of the saints; such as 'entering into the joy of their Lord'; 'the eternal weight of glory'; 'being satisfied with the likeness of God'; 'reigning with the Lord,' and that without ceasing and for ever. ¹⁵

The problem with creeds and confessions is that they're dry and academic! Or so many people have tried to tell us. Well, is that how it feels when you hear sentences like these? Or do you feel, as I feel, that here are words full of sweetness and delight? I'm left wondering if such folk have ever actually read the great confessions of faith!

Let me encourage you to know and to love the great creeds and confessions of the Church. They are a treasure beyond all reckoning.

NOTES

1. G Campbell Morgan, cited by J R de Witt: 'Does the Church Today Need a Confession of Faith?' *Banner of Truth magazine*, issue 104, May 1972, pp 8.
2. B B Warfield: *Spiritual Culture in the Seminary*, in *Selected Shorter Writings vol II*, Presbyterian & Reformed 1973. Pp 492-494.
3. Thomas Watson: *A Body of Divinity*. Banner of Truth repr.
4. Mother's Catechism. Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland Publications repr. Qs 1- 5.
5. A Catechism for Boys and Girls, Carey Publications 1969 (based upon 'A Catechism for Young Children'). Qs 1-5.
6. Dorothy Anderson: *Bible Doctrine: A Workbook on the Shorter Catechism*. Banner of Truth rev ed. 1972.
7. Dennis Hustedt: *Firm in the Faith*. Evangelical Press. 2000.
8. Westminster Shorter Catechism. Q5.
9. Luther's Small Catechism. Part II. The Creed. The First Article. *Of Creation*.
10. Westminster Larger Catechism
11. The Belgic Confession of Faith. Article XIII. *Of Divine Providence*.
12. The Canons of the Synod of Dort. Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine. *Of the Corruption of Man, his Conversion to God, and the Manner thereof*. Articles I & III
13. Westminster Shorter Catechism. Q21.
14. Heidelberg Catechism. Q1.
15. Confession of Faith of the Calvinistic Methodists, or the Presbyterians of Wales. Article 44: *Of the Eternal State of the Wicked and the Godly*.