THE CREEDS IN TIME AND SPACE

EUGENE HEIDEMAN

The Christian denomination which takes its written confessions seriously is one which will also be deeply concerned to advance the whole ecumenical movement. The love for the creeds which have come down from the fathers will not and cannot set itself in opposition to the desire of the churches to come together as one in Jesus Christ. The creeds were born in the desire to bring men together in the one Christian church and to oppose all that which was not Christian and favorable to that unity.

Because the Reformed Church in America has continued to love the creeds which have come down through the ages, she has correctly seen it to be her duty and privilege to become active in the Presbyterian Alliance, the National Council of Churches, and the World Council of Churches. Individual congregations have felt further obliged to cooperate with other ecumenical bodies such as the National Association of Evangelicals or to work together with such institutions as the Moody Bible Institute. Insofar as the Reformed Church as a whole is prompted by her conviction of the truth of the confession of the fathers, this movement towards cooperation is a most laudable activity and surely consistent with her basic biblical principles.

Since, however, there has sometimes been some inclination to view the desire to maintain the confessions of the fathers as one which is in opposition to the ecumenical movements, it is well to examine more carefully the thesis set forth above in which it is maintained that the Christian who loves his confessions will be greatly interested in the ecumenical movement, and, conversely, the one who is truly ecumenical will also be vitally concerned with the confessions of the fathers. In this investigation one can begin by setting forth the place and function of the creeds in the church.

I.

Basically, it is the whole church which confesses. It is neither an individual church member nor an individual minister or elder who is the subject that confesses. One may not even say that it is a local church which in the proper administration of the Word and sacraments confesses. Rather, it is the Christ-confessing church which God has placed in the world which is the subject that confesses. From the Biblical point of
view, the church in its presbyterian order is as much universal church as it is local church and vice versa.

This confessing on the part of the church is not an abstract and timeless statement of the eternal truth. It is rather the *proper* speaking and acting, living and working in the world. Confessing is not an end in itself, but it is done in order that the lines of the salvation and justice of the Lord may be made known. Confessing, living and working are not three activities of the church which stand next to each other. The element of confessing, and thus of the creeds, may not be isolated from the rest of the activity of the church.

One can say that the creeds do not have so much a place as that they have a function in the whole being of the church. In the creeds, the church first of all lays before the world a declaration about the what, how, and why of her activity. Secondly, she reminds herself in her creeds that her social work in the world is to be understood only out of the Kingdom of God and is not a worldly “activism.” Finally, she also has in her creeds the indispensable directives for all her work in its whole and in all of its parts.¹

The church has come to the point of confession and of writing creeds only after she has been led by the Spirit to an encounter with the Bible. The creeds have their basis and authority in the Word of God. No one and nothing else can add any authority to the creeds. The creeds are not a new source of revelation, but always stand under Scripture. The creeds of the church are a commentary on the Scripture in the words and speech of a certain time.

By virtue of the fact that creeds are always based on Scripture, the setting forth of a creed or confession always involves the whole church. One section of the church can never confess for itself alone. Just as the Bible speaks to the whole church, so the confession or creed must by necessity speak for the one, holy, catholic church. When one speaks out what he believes to be the truth of God, his statement, if it really is his creed, is of significance for the whole church. The writing of a creed involves the certainty that one has received the truth from God.

It is precisely at this point that the church of former centuries understood so well the significance of her confessions. She realized the necessity of adding to the end of her confessions a series of anathemas upon all those who held contrary opinions. She was confident that her creed spoke the truth of God, and all who opposed God’s truth were to be damned. If the church is to speak, then she must stand ready to speak

for the whole church. If she is not ready to speak out in the name of the whole church, and if she is not ready to condemn all contrary opinions, she is not yet ready to write her creeds.

The function of creeds therefore places the church in grave danger. There is always the possibility that the creed is in error. It has happened more than once that men have spoken in the name of Christ what in reality were the words of Satan. When one makes that error, one becomes not church, but anti-Christ! There is also the possibility that one does not fully believe his own confession, in which case one stands under the anathemas which he has pronounced himself. It is well for those who speak in terms of writing new creeds to first consider the dangers involved in such activity.

In the light of the dangers involved in the writing of creeds, it is not surprising that confessions and creeds have come almost exclusively out of times of grave crisis, when men were no longer able to escape writing creeds and confessions. Only when the church found itself with its back to the wall in the battle with Arianism did it write the Nicene Creed. In the sixteenth century, when all types of teachings and heresies were being heard, a prince ordered that the Heidelberg Catechism be written. When the Roman Catholic stood ready to massacre the Protestants in the Low Countries, Guido de Bres wrote the Belgic Confession in the desperate hope that the Spanish would be converted. The Hervormde Kerk in The Netherlands at the beginning of the seventeenth century felt the power of the Remonstrant rationalists and were forced to write the immortal Canons of Dort. These men knew the dangers involved in the writing of these creeds, but found themselves forced to write in the name of the one holy catholic church against those who threatened to destroy it.

The origin of the creeds is clear evidence of the fact that creeds have an historical, political, and even national character. Creeds are written at a definite point in history and bear clear evidence of that time. The Nicene Creed as well as that of Chalcedon were written in terms of their day. They use the Greek language, with all of its philosophical overtones. The political controversies of the day also left their marks on the decisions of the councils. These creeds cannot possibly be viewed as exclusively theological documents. In the days of the writing of the creeds, men had not yet progressed to that high state of culture and knowledge where it becomes possible to separate the church and state into clearly distinct compartments.

Finally, once creeds are written, they cannot be forgotten or dismissed. In the creeds, the fathers have confessed what they believed to be the message of the Word of God. They spoke for the whole church, not only
in the world of their day, but also for the church of all time. The church is one in both space and time. The Spirit has been active through the ages, bringing men to confession of their Lord. One cannot neglect the creeds without denying the work of the Spirit in the past. His work remains of power today. The words of the fathers must be constantly re-examined in the light of the Word of God.

The relationship between the authority of the Bible and that of the confessions of the fathers can never be a logical one. On the one hand, the creeds always stand under the authority of the Word, and can never be placed next to it. The creeds always stand open to the criticism of the Word and must bow to it. On the other hand, the content of the creeds is the same as that of the Word in that they are the true interpretation of the Word. The presbyterian system has a place not only for the living Word of God, but also for the man who hears that Word. The presbyterian system, with its doctrine of the Spirit, is here also more true, but less logical than that more “Christological” thought of Rome, where the bishops or Pope can give infallible interpretations of Scripture.

II.

The fact that the writing and maintaining of a creed involves one in the responsibility of speaking for and to the whole church is a clear indication that the Reformed Church has been consistent with her confessions when she lives in and with the ecumenical bodies in the world. Under no circumstances may the Reformed Church ever allow herself to believe or to be told that the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Belgic Confession together with the Canons of Dort are only for members of the Reformed Church or for people of Dutch nationality and extraction. If these three creeds are true for anyone, they are true for the whole church. The confessions are to be proclaimed to all members of the Reformed Church and also to other denominations.

The Reformed Church, insofar as she believes her creeds, longs to give them full publicity and to discuss them with others. With regard to other denominations, this discussion takes on the aspect of ecumenical activity. The various churches come together, each certain that its own creed is the best and truest confession of the message of the Gospel. Each church enters the ecumenical discussion feeling to at least a certain extent that she has a “mission” to carry out with regard to the other churches. Each comes with a willingness to allow the others to examine its confession, for it is certain that through that examination and comparison the other will gain deeper insights into the Christian faith. Out of this discussion and mutual examination, each is surprised and also
thankful to learn that now and then the other has insights which prove helpful to the understanding of one's own confession.

The ecumenical discussion of the churches makes prominent the "open" character of the creeds. Each denomination enters the discussion more or less certain of her own confession as that which most completely and most clearly sets forth the witness of Scripture. Its own creed expresses and protects most fully the mystery of the revelation. Yet in the discussion, the creeds are permanently open to criticism. He who can say it better may say it better. Ecumenical discussion protects the church from a "creedalism" which destroys the creeds themselves. The church which bends all of its efforts to protect its creeds may discover that while preserving the form it has lost the content. A creed is not to be zealously guarded in the safe of the church, but it is to be placed on the billboards along the highway where, although vulnerable to being defaced, they nevertheless proclaim their message to the world.

Because the creeds have a function as well as a place in the whole being of the church, ecumenical discussion of the creeds necessarily takes place on a broad front. The whole congregation in all of its activity enters into the conversation. The boy in Sunday School asking who made God, the young man troubled about the social message of the church, the older man who is concerned about the younger generation, and the theologian writing about election, all make their contributions. The mission boards, educational agencies, committees on justice and good will, publicity committees and scholars speak in turn. Not only faith and order, but also life and work conferences make statements. The whole church is active in the discussion of the creeds.

If this broad discussion is to take place, then it becomes essential that the creeds be placed in the open where they can be seen and studied by everyone. One of the great dangers in denominations which require that ministers sign a formula stating their agreement with the creeds is that men will begin to believe that the confessional statements are intended for the ministers alone. They tend to be viewed as intellectual statements which insure the orthodoxy of the ministry. Thus it comes about that one begins to hear statements that certain doctrines, such as predestination, are to be believed but not preached. No greater damage can be done to the creeds than to refuse to preach any part of them. The three symbols of the Reformed Church in America form one corporate whole. One cannot neglect any point without damaging the whole witness. Here one sees the wisdom of our fathers who insisted that the entire Catechism be preached. If one were to make any complaint against the fathers, then it would be that although they made provision for the regular teaching and
preaching of the Catechism, they did not adequately state the role of the Belgic Confession with the Canons of Dort. It is precisely in the latter documents that the doctrine of the church and the doctrine of predestination, election and reprobation. (The forming of which, incidentally, can be considered the high point of the Reformation.) are set forth. One should not glory in the fact that the Catechism does not say very much about election; it is better to see the Catechism as standing in close relationship to the other two documents. If the Reformed Church is to become ecumenical in the deepest sense of the word, then her creeds must be placed before all of her members where they can be studied and acted upon. These confessions are not for ministers alone, but they are for and of the whole church.

It may happen now and then that the ecumenical discussion will be interrupted by a person or church with an answer to the whole problem. At first the assembly may be pleased, then become puzzled, and finally disagree completely. At such moments when an Arius, a Nestorius, or a Servetus sets forth his well-reasoned explanation, ecumenical discussion is temporarily stopped until the heretic is driven from the assembly. Ecumenical discussion can be held only by members of the Christian church. Heretics always bring a divisive element into the assembly. The various answers of the churches all remain possibilities in the discussion but the rationalistic views of the heretic cannot possibly be right and must be immediately rejected for otherwise the whole ecumenical discussion will come to an end.

There are only two possibilities for any Christian denomination, and especially for that denomination which respects its creeds. Either one must enter into the ecumenical discussion with the other denominations or he must be ready to declare the other a heretic. To take the middle way, the way of allowing each denomination to live with its own beliefs and creeds is to deny the truth or at best the relevance of one's own confession. If the three confessions of the Reformed Church are true and relevant, then it is absolutely necessary that she enter into discussion with all other Christians. Labels must not be allowed into the decision to discuss. "Liberals," "Conservative," "Fundamentalist," must be approached ecumenically unless we are ready to pronounce the other a heretic.

The Christian who takes his confession seriously will never criticize anyone for being too ecumenically minded. There have been times when the Reformed Church has hesitated with regard to ecumenical discussion. Let it never be said, however, that she hesitated because she is afraid to enter into the conversation. She may hesitate only when the discussion is not ecumenical enough. When we discuss, we must be free to discuss
everything. The unity of the church in all of her aspects must be made known to faith.

It is precisely at this point that criticism of American ecumenical activity can be made. The greatest difficulty at present in our North American circles is that men are afraid to be thoroughly ecumenical. Churches are ready to work together in the area of life and work, but they are all too often afraid to be ecumenical in the matter of faith and order. One must be careful at this point that he does not become self-satisfied in his own desire to think more deeply into theological or ethical matters than do others. It is all too tempting for the local pastor to desire to protect his flock from the viewpoints of pastors of other denominations and the thoughts of other congregations. Ecumenical discussion of faith and order, if it is to be worth anything, must also be carried out at the local level among members of various congregations and denominations. The belief that one has been led by the Spirit of God to confess by the words of the three formulas should cause us to desire to discuss also at the local level these matters with others. It is the duty of the Reformed Church, just because she is so certain that Truth is One and that her creeds are true, to insist on the most complete ecumenical activity at every level.

It is also well to note, however, that to a certain extent the three formulas are not completely suited to the American scene. The thought patterns of these documents are Dutch and German, not Anglo-Saxon or American. No American can understand them, therefore, as fully as will a Dutchman or German. We live in a different political and cultural situation. What is true of the Reformed Church in America can also be said for almost every other American denomination. The truly American confession is yet to be written, just as the development of an American theology is still in its infant stages. Yet someday the Gospel must also become fully incarnate in American flesh as it has become so in Europe, and as it must also do in Japan, China, and in the rest of the world. We may be thankful for the ecumenical discussions held at Evanston in 1954, but this must not blind Americans to the necessity for continued discussion in the National Council of Churches and other American bodies. European culture is not American culture; European theology is not American theology. Americans must also learn to discuss by themselves. They must learn to know their own unity in Christ in order that they may come to understand the world wide unity in our Savior.

Someday God may give an American confession to the Church. We cannot force him to give it, we only hope and pray. We must not become
impatient and hastily begin writing our own creeds. On the contrary, in light of the history of the writing of such creeds and the circumstances under which they were written, perhaps we are more inclined to hope such creeds need never be written, or at least not be written in our time. Meanwhile, it should not even be suggested that the present creeds of the American churches are to be lightly regarded because they belong to another culture. On the contrary, those creeds, because they are true and relevant, will never lose their power. When the Heidelberg Catechism was written and published in Germany and Holland, the Apostle's Creed was not rejected because of its Greek origin. On the contrary, it was taken up and incorporated into the Catechism. We can expect something similar to happen with present European creeds in the American situation. The past is not forgotten. Whenever the confessions are taken seriously, they hold Christians in that unity with all Christians of all times and places. In unity with the confessions of the Fathers, Christ is confessed in the whole world today.