

Toward a Sober Understanding of Confessions

Luther's dogmatic affirmation "Here I Stand" was spoken in reaction to the Romanists' rejection of biblical authority. This affirmation must continue to be the church's perpetual desire so she will mature into all glory and fullness. However, affirming the Scriptures as our sole authority in both doctrinal and practical matters does not exclude the necessity of confessions.¹ In fact, a strong church is a confessional church. The idea of someone claiming that all he needs is the Bible sounds noble, but at the point when he is asked what he believes the Bible teaches he has just experienced a confessional conversion. He has begun to put into sentences or paragraphs what he believes the Bible teaches about certain things.² In other words, confessions are inescapable. But as in all human documents, there must be limitations. As John Frame summarizes:

Confessions are not Scripture, and they should not be treated as infallible or as ultimately normative. Indeed, I believe it is important that in a church fellowship it be possible to revise the creeds, and for that purpose, it must also be possible for members and officers to dissent from the creed within some limits.³

Strict subscription to confessions tends to undermine the sufficiency of Scripture. When denominations do not allow ministers to take any exception with the Westminster Confession of Faith—as an example—then "Scripture is not given the freedom to reform the church according to God's will."⁴ The Reformational motto *Semper Reformanda* (Always Reforming) needs to take preeminence in these discussions. No Reformed theologian today—no matter how strict in his subscription—can deny that the church has matured greatly since the days of the Reformation. For better or for worse the insights of Meredith Kline⁵ have greatly shaped one portion of the Reformed world. Cornelius Van Til and his disciple Greg Bahnsen have essentially overturned centuries, if not, a millennia of thinking on the topic of apologetics.⁶ There are other examples, but these should suffice. Further, if strict subscriptionists desire to excommunicate those who take exceptions with the Confession (s), then, in order to be consistent they will have to excommunicate some significant names in the Reformed tradition. The name John Murray is immediately associated with Reformed theology. But Murray, a Scottish Presbyterian, wanted to revise the Confession's concept of *The Covenant of Works*. Murray denied that

¹ One could add the idea of creeds, however, no one in this debate—to my knowledge—denies any assertion from the Apostle's or Nicene Creed. In some cases, creeds and confessions are used interchangeably, such as in John Frame's quotation.

² If someone asks you what does your church teach and if you reply that it teaches the Bible, you are certainly making a distinction between an historic orthodox church and unorthodox churches. However, there are still hundreds, if not thousands of churches who affirm a commitment to biblical authority. At the point you begin to differentiate your church's beliefs with others, you have just formed a confession.

³ John Frame, [Introduction to the Reformed Faith](http://www.thirdmill.org/files/reformedperspectives/hall_of_frame/ST1_Introduction%20to%20the%20Reformed%20Faith.pdf), http://www.thirdmill.org/files/reformedperspectives/hall_of_frame/ST1_Introduction%20to%20the%20Reformed%20Faith.pdf

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Meredith Kline was Old Testament professor at Westminster Seminary (West). Kline introduced new theories on understanding God's covenant via the Suzerain Treaties of the Ancient Near East.

⁶ Van Til's Presuppositionalism is an overturning of the largely classical and evidential views of the early church, even during the Puritan era with Jonathan Edwards.

the covenant of works, as explained in the WCF, accurately reflected the Adamic relationship with God in the garden.⁷ Hence, the Covenant of Works has never been a litmus test for Reformed Theology, though it is continually used as one. As Ralph Smith puts it:

That being the case, it is either ignorant or perverse to raise the doctrine of the Covenant of Works to the status of a litmus test in our day. Denial of the Covenant of Works is *not* tantamount to a denial of Reformed theology.⁸

Those who excommunicate Federal Vision advocates from the Reformed camp are guilty of taking significant exceptions. For instance, the Framework hypothesis taught by Meredith Kline is a strong discontinuity from the 6-day creation position, yet the Westminster Confession of Faith (4:1) states that God created the world in the “space of six days.”⁹ This and many other examples prove that opponents of Federal Vision theology are carefully choosing issues within the Reformed tradition and making them litmus tests when the Reformed community over the centuries have never treated them as such.

The Covenant and the Confessions

The branch of the Reformed tradition to which one belongs determines what confessions their churches or denominations subscribe to. Those in the Presbyterian/Scottish tradition subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith (the English or American version). Those in the Dutch Reformed tradition subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity (Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dordt). There are many other confessions, but these are the most well-known and are used throughout the world.

But does Federal Vision Theology stand against the great Reformed Confessions? The answer to this question is found by asking another question: “Is the WCF (or any other confessions) an exhaustive treatment of all the biblical themes and theologies?” If it is, then the FV is certainly not in full accord with the Confession; if it is not, then there is plenty of room to discuss these matters; further, there is plenty of room for additional insights from the church, and to the dismay of some, there is room for confessional revision.

As has been discussed earlier, FV is attempting to look at the covenant from a tangible perspective. In other words, FV proposes that one is actually able to take a picture of an elect member of the historical church. The tangibility of the sacrament of baptism makes this possible. An infant or an adult is incorporated into God’s church through the waters of baptism. Thus the covenant is objective; seen by human eyes; not dependent on emotional or subjective experiences. Ask the question: “What is the pastoral applicability of the covenant?” and the answer is living the baptized life in the community of saints. This is what objectivity means. FV advocates are asking “What does it mean to be in the covenant now?” The Westminster Confession of Faith has settled the matter of eternal election. There is no doubt that those who are elect unto eternal life, as Paul says in Ephesians, are elect unto perseverance on

⁷ John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray: 4, Studies in Theology*, “Covenant Theology,” (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), pp. 217-18. The same can be said of G.C. Berkouwer.

⁸ Ralph Allen Smith, *The Covenant of Works: A Litmus Test for Reformed Theology*.
<http://www.berith.org/essays/litmus/>

⁹ See *Reformed Theology and Six Day Creation* by Kenneth Gentry.

earth. They will never fall away (Rom. 8:28-20). They will never apostatize (WCF 3:4).¹⁰ FV proponents in no way deny this biblical truth taught by the Reformers. As Douglas Wilson writes in his book *Reformed is Not Enough*: “In no way is the objectivity of the covenant inconsistent with these truths about God’s sovereignty. In no way am I backing away from high-octane Calvinism.”¹¹

The Confession and the Objectivity of the Covenant

The Westminster Confession of Faith focuses its attention on the eternal nature of the covenant. This is not difficult to understand in light of the historical context of the Westminster Standards. One clear example of this is seen when the student of history traces the use or definition of the word “theology.” *Theology* has historically—within the Reformed community—been defined as a science; much like the study of mathematics and physics. Some have seen it mainly as the duty of the scholar behind the seminary desk, with little application to the community. The Puritans made a significant move forward in their day. Theology, for the Puritans, became a way of life. In the author’s perspective, however, the Puritans failed to apply theology in an objective and consistent manner.¹² Not until the writings of John Frame-- Professor of Systematic Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary-- has theology become a concretely applicable concept.¹³ To John Frame, theology is servanthood, and it is the application of Scriptures to the life of the community. This definition of theology has a two-sided focus: a) propositions and b) the application of propositions. For instance, to affirm that God is faithful is a proposition, but how the people of God live in light of this faithfulness is the other side of the coin.

This is not to strike us as novelty, but rather to teach us that the Church stresses different theological concepts in different eras. In one era it is important to frame our beliefs in a propositional and systematic fashion. In another era it is important to focus on the things revealed unto us and our children (Deut. 29:29). There is much theological controversy in our own day. The Reformed Church needs to be alert against the wolves of liberalism and man-made traditions, but in the days of the Reformers the threat was accentuated due to the political instability of 16th century Europe. In light of this fact, the Reformers carefully framed their theology in light of the current polemics. The modern Reformed community builds upon the foundation of our fathers.

The emphasis of Federal Vision theologians is perfectly aligned with the intentions of the 16th century Reformers. Even in Calvin’s *Institutes* it is clear that the covenant is objective. Calvin’s sacramental and ecclesiastical theology makes this abundantly clear. For Calvin, baptism means union with Christ.¹⁴ Infants can have assurance of their faith because they are baptized into the Triune Name. They do not need to reach the mysterious age of accountability. This radical subjectivism has led to perpetual doubt in the church. The life after baptism is a life of faith and not of doubt.

¹⁰ These...men, thus predestined, and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished (3:4). One can also look at the First Head of Doctrine, Article 17 of the Canons of Dordt to see clear proof that the Reformers taught that “children of believers are holy...in virtue of the gracious covenant...from infancy...and that this election should not be doubted.” How many in our Reformed world have this perspective today?

¹¹ Douglas Wilson, *Reformed is not Enough*. 30-31.

¹² One can argue that Abraham Kuyper did a great service to the church in applying theology to all of life.

¹³ See his *Doctrine of the Christian Life*.

¹⁴ See Rich Lusk’s *Calvin on Baptism, Penance, and Absolution*: <http://www.hornes.org/theologia/rich-lusk/calvin-on-baptism-penance-absolution>

The greatest contribution of FV to the Reformed Faith in our present era is continuing working out this covenantal vision for the Church. The Church has only begun to plunge the depths of what God has in store for His people. In the words of James B. Jordan, "The Church is in its infancy." Since this is the case, we should strive to conform our confessions, our churches, and our lives to the eternal living Word of God. The Church must pursue maturation and build on the faith once delivered unto us.

Conclusion

Confessionalism is an inescapable concept. We must all be conscientiously confessional. Since our Reformed tradition subscribes to certain confessions, it is wise that pastors submit to them and rely on them as helpful summaries of Scriptural teachings. However, pastors should not strictly subscribe to these confessions assuming that they are the last word or the perfect summary of the Scriptures. Confessions must always be subservient to the Scriptures. Confessions must be open to revision or addition, thus the Reformed Church must take heed, lest we commit the error of Rome and place human tradition at the same level as God's inerrant word. God forbid!