

Lesson 5: Heresy and Symbols

Heresy is an error in a fundamental article of the Christian Religion, taught and defended with obstinacy (1 Timothy 1:19; Titus 3:10-11).

What are the Fundamentals Articles of the Christian Religion?

- Fundamental truths are all such points of doctrine which are so plainly delivered in Scripture, that whosoever doth not know or follow them shall be damned; but he that doth know and follow these (though erring in other things) shall be saved.¹
- It is the masterpiece of all the divines of Christendom, to say, what is fundamental in Christianity, and what is not.²
- “We take the greatest care to hold that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all. ... We shall hold to this rule if we follow universality, antiquity, and consent.”
- So, fundamentals are identifiable by *Scriptural clarity* and *systematic necessity*, and they should be compared to *historical continuity* and *ecclesiastical commonality*.

The Utility of Creeds and Confessions in the Context of Heresy and Orthodoxy

Creedal formulas and confessions of faith (1) *establish* fundamentals, (2) *express* common agreement, (3) *expose* heresies, (4) *exonerate* the accused, and (5) *expedite* transmission of orthodoxy.

- It is lawful to use new words though not in Scripture, when the matter is contained therein, to discover and distinguish heretics.³
- The greatest heretics that [ever] were... acknowledge the Scripture to be the word of God, and will swear and subscribe the word of God and contain themselves within the words of Scripture. But their faith is not the faith of the Scripture, and this makes ten thousand and millions of faiths... For... every heretic [has] a faith according to the sense that he falsely puts on the Scripture, and all may swear one Confession of faith in Scripture-words.⁴
- As it's impious to deny the use of Scripture-forms of speaking; so it's downright malice to condemn those that are commonly received, so long as reason proves not, that they maintain anything against Scripture. In ecclesiastical histories and acts of synods there are abundance of examples of this nature. Our age has seen one in *Valentinus Gentilis*; who, that he might destroy the unity of the divine essence, in his explication of the three Persons, quarreled first with the received terms, such as are the *ousia* and *hypostasis* of the Persons. For as long as they were made use of, he saw 'twas impossible to maintain three Spirits distinct in essence and degree.⁵
- As one man accused of heresy may publish a confession of his faith which may clear his innocence and the soundness of his faith to others and remove the scandal according to 1 Peter 3:15, by the same reason Independents...Anabaptists and all the sects of England, upon the same ground...should by some confession and covenant give an account of their

¹ Leigh, *A Systeme or Body of Divinity*, Prolegomena.

² Herbert Thorndike, *An Epilogue to the Tragedy of the Church of England* (London: J.M., 1659), 159.

³ Anthony Burgess, *A Treatise of Original Sin* (London: n.p., 1658), 5.

⁴ Samuel Rutherford, *A Free Disputation against Pretended Liberty of Conscience* (London: R.I., 1649), 31-32.

⁵ Benedict Aretius, *A Short History of Valentinus Gentilis* (London: E. Whitlock, 1696), 10-11.

faith...And so I look at a form or confession of faith as a necessary apology for clearing of the good name of a church defamed with heresies.⁶

- When [Papists] feel themselves pressed with most strong reasons, and overcome with express places of Scripture, they run to cavils and slanders, as to the only refuge of their errors. They say we have revolted from the Catholic Church that we might follow divers imaginations of men. They cry aloud that we are *heretics*, *schismatics*, and *sectaries*, and they oft times in mockery call us Confessionists. And moreover they lay in our dish that we neither agree with ourselves, nor with others, who detest the bishop of Rome, but there are as many religions among us as there are confessions of faith....

But let them so think, that the fault of *heresy* is not to be laid upon those, whose faith altogether relies on most sure grounds of Scripture, that they are no *schismatics* who entirely cleave to God's church such a one as the Prophets & Apostles do describe unto us, nor to be accounted *sectaries*, who embrace the truth of God, which is one and always like itself.

What do they mean, I pray you, by the name of the "Confessionists" so often repeated? For if every man be commanded to make confession of his faith so often as God's glory, and the edifying of the church shall require, what a wonderful or strange thing ought it to seem, if cities, if provinces, if whole kingdoms have made profession of their faith, when they were falsely charged by the Popish sort, that they had gone from the doctrine of the true believing Church?

But they will say, there ought to be one confession of faith and no more, as though forsooth, *a confession of faith were to be valued rather by the words, than by the thing itself*. What therefore will they say to our ancestors, who when they had the Apostles' Creed, yet for all that set out the Nicene, Chalcedonian, and many more such like creeds? ... What that Athanasius, Augustine, and many other ancients set forth their creeds also, that the purity of Christian faith might more and more shine forth. ... Let them therefore leave off in mockery to term us "Confessionists," unless perhaps they look for this answer at our hands, that it is a far more excellent thing to bear a name of confessing the faith, than of denying the truth. For even as many small streams may flow from one spring, so many confessions of faith may issue out from one and the same truth of faith."⁷

The Authority of Creeds and Confessions in the Context of Heresy and Orthodoxy

- As for the creeds and confessions of particular churches, they are in substance God's word, and they bind not in conscience by any power the church has, but because they are the word of God.⁸
- In subscribing the Articles they subscribe the Scriptures, because they verily believe them to contain the sense of the Scriptures. And if there be nothing in those articles, but what they believe to be in the Scriptures, [and] if they have therefore subscribed them, because they look upon the mind and meaning of God to be clearly represented therein, then have they in so doing, as truly subscribed the Scriptures, as if they had subscribed an Article on the very Words of the Scripture.⁹

⁶ Rutherford, *A Free Disputation*, 30.

⁷ Jean-François Salvard, ed., *An Harmony of the Confessions of the Faith of the Christian and Reformed Churches* (Cambridge: Thomas Thomas, 1586), iiii.-iiiiir. Emphasis added.

⁸ William Perkins, *A Discourse of Conscience* (Cambridge: John Legate, 1596), 67.

⁹ *A Sober Defence of the Reverend Ministers Who, by a Subscription, have lately declared their faith in the Trinity* (London: R. Cruttenden, 1719), 22.