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Foreword

The purpose of *Christian Studies* is to promote responsible reflection among Christians. This issue presents a collection of articles addressing a variety of topics. Although these articles are not closely connected in content, they are related in intent. Ranging in subject matter from Restoration hermeneutics to the contemporary “culture wars,” these articles offer the reader much cause for reflection.

Christian Studies is honored to present the lecture by Abraham J. Malherbe, Emeritus Professor of New Testament at Yale Divinity School. Professor Malherbe is a former teacher of many of the faculty and longtime friend of the Institute for Christian Studies.

Appreciation is due Mrs. Denise James for her work in preparing the manuscript for publication.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

Creeds and Their Uses: The New Testament*

Abraham J. Malherbe

A glance at the titles of the conference presentations impresses one with the usefulness of the theme "Through the Eyes of Faith" to address a vast multiplicity of issues that have engaged Christians and continue to do so. My effort is quite limited in scope and differs from most of the other presentations in being an explicitly biblical study. I hope that this will make it not merely quaint or evocative of the sort of thing that was done in a bygone era.

The New Testament views faith under different aspects, such as the subjective response to the proclaimed message of Christ, the doctrinal stipulation and elaboration of that response, and the life that is lived in commitment to Christ. I shall focus on the way in which faith was formulated in the New Testament, and on how those formulations were used in the life of the church. What we shall discover is that there was considerable diversity in both formulation and function. I shall also make some comments on the challenge that this offers for a program of Restoration. I hope that these ruminations of a professional student of the New Testament may be of interest to persons more experienced in the discussion of Restorationism than I am.

* This lecture was presented at the Christian Scholars Conference, July 26, 1994, on the campus of Pepperdine University, on the occasion of Professor Malherbe's reception of the Distinguished Alumnus of the Year Award of the College of Biblical and Family Studies of Abilene Christian University. —*Editor*.

Confessional Formulation and the Restoration Movement

I should like to begin with a bit of autobiography. As a teenager in South Africa, I attended a confirmation class in the local Dutch Reformed Church in which we studied the catechism in great detail. The catechism provided structured instruction in the faith; in effect, it was a kind of commentary on the statement of belief as expressed in the Apostles' Creed. The church's view was that mastery of the catechism, at least on some level, should be prerequisite to the next stage of the faith development of the young person, admission to a new level of membership in the church.

Then I came in contact with missionaries of the Church of Christ who were, in their words, extending the borders of the kingdom of God through gospel preaching. The goal of this preaching was the baptism of those who heard the missionaries' preaching, and baptism was presented as the means by which God had founded the church on Pentecost and continued to add the newly converted to the church. What struck me, however, was the focus on the individual who was being preached to and the responsibility laid on that individual. This responsibility was implicit in the language that was constantly used, for example, the New Testament practice of speaking of obedience to the preaching of the gospel, and, what seemed to be a locution traditional to the missionaries' church, "the age of accountability." There was also the expectation that the accountable, obedient person would respond in the manner detailed at the end of each sermon, by hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, and submitting to baptism.

What struck me was the stress on the human side of the transaction and, of greater moment for our present interest, the immediacy of the response required. There was no room allowed for catechesis, and certainly no creed to which one was expected to assent. Upon registering these reflections to the missionaries, I was pointed to examples in the Book of Acts of people who responded to missionary preaching on the spot and were not required to adopt an elaborate "man made" creed. It was pointed out to

me that “creed” comes from the Latin *credo*, which means “I believe,” and is simply a statement of faith, such as the Ethiopian eunuch, according the KJV, made as the only prerequisite to baptism, after he had been taught from the Scriptures. The only required creed which we find in the New Testament, then, I was informed, was such a one as that of the eunuch, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” In short, I was told, Christ is our only creed.

I realize that in beginning this way I run all sorts of risks, not least of which is that I may appear to be a sort of contemporary ancestor. Nevertheless, my story contains several elements that have been characteristic of that branch of the so-called Restoration Movement I have known and been a part of for more than forty years. Among these are the power of simplicity and indeed the recognition of human responsibility, something to which I, as a disaffected South African Calvinist, particularly resonated. But I was not then, nor am I now, persuaded that the matter of confessional formulation can be dispensed with so easily. To reduce the creedal formula to that of the eunuch and to restrict it to the setting of baptism is a bit too facile.

Confessional Formulations in the New Testament

The New Testament presents a situation that is considerably more complex, and I invite you to consider a number of texts which I shall attempt to place in their historical settings. You will have noted that my missionary friend answered my questions by leading me to the Book of Acts and pointing to what he considered normative historical data. That seems to me characteristically Restorationist in approach, and I shall approach my texts in the same manner, although it will be the epistles and gospels to which I will primarily, but not exclusively, turn. I hope that you will resonate positively to so old fashioned an approach to the biblical text and that you will work with me.

This is what we shall discover as we examine this clutch of texts which contain confessional statements. Confession took different forms, which were determined by the settings in which the confessions were formulated. Furthermore, the confessions were put to different functions in the first-century church. Finally, I shall then raise the question about the significance of this diversity of form and function for a Restorationist view of the normativity of the New Testament.

Preaching and Confession

The earliest confessions have to do with the identity of Jesus, and are placed by the Gospels in the life of Jesus. There are statements which acknowledge who Jesus was by persons who were not his followers, for example, those possessed by demons (Mark 1:24; 5:7), but we are concerned with confession by those who have attached themselves to Jesus. The earliest confession of this sort is the one Jesus elicits from Peter at Caesarea Philippi. Peter's simple confession, according to Mark, is made in straightforward terms: "You are the Christ" (Mark 8:29). In a Jewish context, there is no evident need to elaborate on the relationship between the Anointed and God, although, as the verses on the suffering of the Son of Man that follow show, it was necessary to say something about the peculiar identity of the Christ as one who suffers in accord with God's scheme of things. The claim that Jesus was the Christ was the focus of preaching to Jews, as appears from Paul's sermon in the synagogue in Thessalonica (Acts 17:3):

He argued with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ."

It is this Jewish form of the preaching which must have elicited the Jewish form of the confession of Peter. The formulation is congruent with its cultural setting, and this particular setting is one in which God and his will

are known through the saving history reflected primarily in the Psalms and the Prophets.

Now look at the Matthean parallel to the confession at Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:16): "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Matthew goes further than Mark by saying something about the Christ's relation to God (he is God's Son) and describes God as the Living God. The significance of these differences becomes more obvious when we realize that we again have to do with preaching, but this time the kind of preaching that was directed to Gentiles who had no background in the Scriptures. In 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 Paul has such people in mind when he summarizes what is generally thought to be an outline of preaching to Gentiles: "how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come."

Here Jesus is not the Anointed of God whose dealings are revealed in the Scriptures, but the Son of the Living God. Luke tells us what the latter means in Acts 14:15, when he has Paul say to the Lycaonian pagans: "We bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God *who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.*" Jesus is thus described as the Son of the Creator to those who had no knowledge of the God of the Scriptures, and that description was derived from the practice of Jews, who before the Christians, had developed such descriptions in their proclamations to pagans. Matthew's form of the confession, I suggest, is an accommodation to such a Gentile setting.

Something analogous is seen elsewhere, in Paul, when he reflects on his preaching to Gentiles and their reception of his message. There Jesus is not preached and confessed as Christ or Son, but as Lord, and in that capacity is related to God as the Creator who raised him from the dead. A section of 2 Corinthians which begins with a reference to Paul's preaching to the Corinthians as being inspired by "the Spirit of the Living God" (3:3), ends with the claim,

What we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus sake. For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (4:5-6).

So the preaching of Christ as Lord takes place at the behest of the Creator.

The response Paul strove for with such preaching is described in Romans 10. Paul had preached "a word of faith" (10:8), which I understand as preaching designed to evoke faith in those who heard the preaching. That word is, ideally, appropriated existentially so that, Paul says,

If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his mouth, and so is saved (10:9-10).

On what occasion is such confession made? Certainly, in response to preaching, but the quotation from Joel 2:23 in v. 13, "Every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved," suggests that all this was associated with baptism, for Luke says that Ananias directed Paul to "rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16).

It is quite possible that, in addition to being a response to preaching, confession also found a place in another setting. According to Colossians 2:6-7, the reality of what was confessed was to form the basis of the Christian life. "As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving." Such thanksgiving is at times associated with worship, especially with singing (Col. 3:16-17). We happen to possess a hymn which culminates in the precise confession we have just discovered in Romans 10. Note the similarities of the last strophe of the hymn embedded in Philippians 2 to Romans 10:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (2:9-11).

The confession in view here seems to be part of the worship of the church.

Confession and Doctrinal Controversy

So far, we have concentrated on the ways the confession of Jesus took different forms in different cultural contexts, but we have confined ourselves to a particular function of the confession, the response to or the appropriation of the preaching of Christ, and have discovered intimations that confession of the Lordship of Jesus was part of the church's hymnody. We now turn to another setting in which confession functioned, namely disputes about conduct and belief. In 1 Corinthians 8 Paul begins a long discussion about eating meat that had been offered to idols. Some Christians justified their practice of eating idol meat by insisting that idols had no real existence and, using the traditional Jewish confession, "There is no God but one" (8:4).

In response, Paul modifies their absolutism by referring to the existence of demonic beings, the "so-called gods," but then quotes a confessional statement that he and the Corinthians both accepted:

For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist (1Cor. 8:6).

As to the *form* of this confession, we note a number of things. There are two members to the confession, the first dealing with God, the second with Jesus Christ. God is called the Father, not in a relational sense, that is, as our Father, or Jesus' Father, but as progenitor, the Creator, as is also done, for example, by Philo, the first-century Jewish philosopher. Furthermore, a device developed by Stoic philosophers, a succinct use of

prepositions (“from whom,” “for whom”) to describe causation, is used, and the cosmic dimension is further captured by “all things.” The same devices are used to describe Jesus, who is not the Son of the Father here, as one might expect, but Lord and the agent of creation.

As to the *function* of this creed, Paul introduces it for argumentative purposes. Something as basic as what is contained in this confession can be expected to be held by all Christians. Elsewhere in 1 Corinthians Paul also begins with what can be assumed to be shared by all involved, only to proceed to draw out its consequences or to modify what is believed (e.g., 12:1–3; 15:1ff.) He does the same thing here, when he says, “However, not all have this knowledge” (8:7), and then sharpens his dispute in the verses that follow. Paul does engage in theological disputation here, but he is still primarily interested in modifying behavior, that is, he wants the meat eaters to forgo their right to indulge themselves in this matter.

Related to the use of a creed in theological dispute is a far-reaching polemical use which does not seek so much to influence behavior as to codify doctrine to be defended by the church militant. In 1 Timothy 3, qualifications for bishops and deacons are given so that, during the apostolic absence, one may “know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). The truth in view is then specified in a creed:

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, and taken up in glory (1 Tim. 3:16).

This systematic, structured creed is an early stage in the development that would lead to the Old Roman Symbol and then to the Apostles’ Creed. What is especially noteworthy is that this well structured creed defining the truth is the possession of a well structured church that is to defend it, evidently against heretics, some of whose doctrines are mentioned immediately after the creed.

In the creed in 1 Tim 3:16, Christ's incarnation is included for the first time. This is also a matter of great importance in the Johannine letters. These letters have in view heretics who were upsetting the scattered house churches in Asia Minor. Claiming to speak by the Spirit, the heretics offered new insights into the nature of Christ. In this setting, the confession of the incarnation functions in two ways.

First, it is used as a means for the *testing of orthodoxy*.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God (1 John 4:1-3).

The second function of the creed is that it becomes a means of *community control*. Second John has in mind those who do not confess the incarnation (2 John 7) and gives directions on how to treat them. "If any one comes and does not bring this doctrine [i. e., of the incarnation], do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting" (2 John 10). The application of the creed thus determines the social boundaries of the church.

Confession and Persecution

Up to this point, we have taken note of confessions in a number of different forms, functioning in a number of different ways. All the functions we have indicated are, however, intracommunal. The last function we now look at is that of testifying in the face of persecution, thus a confession addressed to those outside the church. In the mission charge in Matthew 10, Jesus anticipates that his disciples would be hauled before the authorities and there bear testimony. They were not to be anxious about what they were to say, Jesus tells them, for the Holy Spirit would speak through them (Matt. 10:17-20). Jesus himself was the great exemplar, confessing during his trial that he was the Christ (Mark 14:61-62; 15:2).

When the high priest asked, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" he replied, "I am," thus making what 1 Tim 6:13 has in mind when referring to the "good confession," but having it made before Pontius Pilate.

It was not only before the Roman authorities that the content of the confession was at issue. Luke has Paul saying that as a persecutor of Christians he sought them out in the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme (Acts 26:11). At issue was probably the Christian claim that the crucified Jesus was the Messiah, something inconceivable to Jews, who knew that according to Deuteronomy 21:23 anyone who hangs on the tree is accursed. Paul as well as other Christians knew this passage from Deuteronomy and applied it to the cross (Gal. 3:12; 1 Pet. 2:24; Acts 5:30; 20:39; 13:29). It is this situation that may explain Paul's strange statement in 1 Corinthians 12:3, "I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says, 'Jesus is cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." What has puzzled commentators about this verse is the setting in which curse and confession could be found as options. It is difficult to conceive of such a setting within the church's life. The options belong naturally, however, to a confrontational setting. Opponents of the Christians, especially but not exclusively Jews, would curse Jesus, to which Christians, moved by the Spirit Christ promised in such circumstances, would confess him. Such fearless confession has the assurance of the Lord,

So every one who confesses me before men, I also will confess before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven (Matt. 10:32-33).

Form and Function of New Testament Creeds

To summarize the New Testament evidence we have rehearsed: We have seen that there are many types and forms of creed in the New Testament. Some of them speak only of Christ and do so in different ways,

for example, as the Jewish Anointed One, or the resurrected Lord, or the incarnate Christ, or the agent of creation, or the Son of God, and do so under different aspects. Other confessions also refer to God, and describe him in different ways, for example, as the God of Scripture who reveals his will there, or the Creator whose agent is described as his Son or as the Lord through whom he sustains all creation. And we have encountered one confession which, in addition, refers to the work of the Spirit in Christ's vindication, a witness to the angels, and the successful preaching to the nations.

We have furthermore seen that this multiplicity of creeds performed different functions: As a means by which to accept preaching which leads to baptism, or confessing Christ in worship, or as traditional statements in theological disputes, or as a definition of the truth that is to be protected by the church, or as a means of identifying heresy and controlling access to the Christian community. Another function of the creed is to testify to the church's opponents, in the process proclaiming Christ while at the same time defining the church's unique character by virtue of its relationship to the One whom it confesses.

New Testament Creeds and Contemporary Restorationism

Now I rapidly and inadequately turn to the possible relevance of all this to Restorationism. If there is any merit to what I have so sketchily outlined, this lecture has focused on a problem at the heart of any program of the Restoration of New Testament Christianity, if by that is meant the reprimination of a seamless whole. The problem is that of diversity within the New Testament. We have not time enough to explore the issue this evening, and in any case that may be the work of the hermeneutists among us, for whom this lecture is really intended. Nevertheless, allow me to comment on some options that present themselves as we seek to come to terms with this diversity.

One approach we might adopt is simply to fudge the issue by denying that there is so much diversity, or, if diversity is admitted, to view it as inconsequential. The latter attitude is sometimes reflected in attempts to reduce the diversity to mere differences in wording and to draw a distinction between confessions, which are evidently less formal and therefore acceptable to us low-church types, and creeds, which are thought of as deliberate creations of the later church, and thus at best artifacts of interest to church historians. But that simply is not allowed by the New Testament evidence; diversity *is* there.

Another option is to acknowledge what I have sketched, but then simply to ignore it. After all, we have done so with other aspects of New Testament practice we have found inconvenient, such as ordination, for which there is ample evidence in the New Testament. Our native anticlericalism, however, has prevented us from incorporating ordination into our practice. There are a few exceptions: for example, we increasingly hear of the ordination of elders, but one seldom hears of the ordination of ministers of the Word. We are clearly selective in what we take from the New Testament, and perhaps we should admit that there are creeds which were used to different purposes, and also admit that we just do not wish to use them in our own practice. One hopes, of course, if that were our decision, that we make it on more rational grounds than our traditional anticreedalism, born of a desire not be like other churches with their creeds.

Were we to opt for the principle of selection, however, how would we differ from those who operate with a canon within a canon, whom we correctly criticize? Would we in principle be different, for example, from Ernst Kaesemann, who discovers a welter of competing theological claims in the New Testament, but insists that it is justification by faith, as heard in the preaching of Christ, that lies at the heart of the Christian message? That, then, allows Kaesemann to dismiss the developing New Testament church, with its offices and creeds, as expressions of early Catholic Christianity, which he considers an aberration of the earliest faith.

Another option is to look at the end of the process, where it all ends up in the New Testament, and to hold out for the most mature and elaborate form of confession, and to insist on it as normative. This, however, would be problematic in the extreme. Which form of the creed is the most mature? There is no one confession that is obviously the one that captures all, or even most, of the elements, that we have come across. Furthermore, even were we to select one confession universally agreed to be the fullest, we would still be falling prey to the temptation of selecting what we wish, precisely what we criticize folk of other persuasions for doing.

We could cut the Gordian knot and do what we do in other matters: Collect all the material identified as confessions and combine them to form one so-called New Testament confession. The difficulties in doing so would be formidable. For one thing, this procedure would result in a homogenized product, its constituent parts forcefully extracted from their historical contexts, in the process losing all nuance. Then, too, even if we were successful in agreeing on what such a confession would be, it boggles the mind to contemplate how it would be used, and how its use could be justified. To identify those uses to which confessions were put in the New Testament and to use the composite confession accordingly will not do, for those uses were congruent with particular forms of confessions which we would have sacrificed in our homogenizations.

My own inclination is to take seriously the diversity of creedal form and function in the canon and to accept the challenge to come to terms with what that means for the church today. There certainly are many difficulties and temptations that will attend such an effort, which should not, however, deter us from adopting such an approach. Let me mention a major one.

It is the question whether, in the face of such diversity, what we learn is not that we should emulate the first-century church by formulating our own confessions to speak to our conditions as the New Testament writers did to theirs. In other words, is not what we discern in the New

Testament really a process, which in principle could or should continue as the church continues to discern ways in which to bear authentic witness to Christ? My answer is an emphatic no, for that would show insufficient understanding of or respect for the notion of canon, which sets a limit to such creative development. Canon requires that we deal with what has been given; it does not allow us to keep on adding or creating anew.

The problem is essentially what this diversity means for us if we commit ourselves to be guided by the canon. This poses a problem for Restorationism if what that program envisages is the restoration of a church uniform in appearance and practice, for such a church cannot be discerned in the pages of the New Testament. What we do encounter there is precisely what, upon reflection, one would expect: manifestations of the Christian faith which are striking for the degree to which they reflect the power with which the gospel reached people in their particularity.

That, it would seem to me, implies a worthy challenge as we face the twenty-first century: How to learn from the first century as we steer between the Scylla of an historical over-simplification and the Charybdis of an historical sophistication that leads to paralysis.

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