

Agreement for Written Debate on Creeds

David N. Landon
Reformed Presbyterian Church

and

Keith Sharp
Church of Christ

Propositions

A local church must recognize the Scriptures alone as its only creed.

Affirmed: _____ (Keith Sharp)

Denied: _____ (David N. Landon)

A local church may adopt a scriptural, uninspired creed as a standard of fellowship.

Affirmed: _____ (David N. Landon)

Denied: _____ (Keith Sharp)

1. Disputants will be David Landon of the Reformed Presbyterian Church and Keith Sharp of the Church of Christ.
2. Each disputant will write an initial article of no more than 1500 words affirming his proposition. In the initial articles no arguments or references will be made to the opponent's position. However, each disputant may submit up to five questions to his opponent in his initial article.
3. Each disputant will write a negative article of no more than 1500 words in response to his opponent's affirmative article.
4. Each disputant will write a response of no more than 1000 words to his opponent's negative article. No new material will be introduced in these concluding articles.
5. The Scriptures will constitute the evidence to be presented.
6. Both disputants agree to manifest a Christ-like spirit throughout.
7. All articles will be published in **Faith & Facts** exactly as they are sent by the disputants. There will be no editorial changes.
8. The entire debate will be published in one issue of **Faith & Facts**.
9. No other articles dealing with the general subject of creeds will appear in that issue of **Faith & Facts**.
10. This will be the final debate between David N. Landon and Keith Sharp. After this debate is published in **Faith & Facts**, John Welch will publish all fourteen debates between David N. Landon and Keith Sharp in one book to be entitled **Calvinism on Trial: The Landon-Sharp Debates**.

I agree to these arrangements and rules:

_____ (David N. Landon)

_____ (Keith Sharp)

_____ (John Welch)

Affirmative
David Landon

Proposition: A local church may adopt a scriptural, uninspired creed as a standard of fellowship.

The only thing wrong with a quarrel, someone has written, is that it interrupts a good argument. Keith is to be commended in that throughout this series of fourteen debates he has argued his position as a Christian ought to argue, without hostility or quarreling. Thanks to Keith, and thanks also to Faith & Facts for publishing these discussions.

This debate focuses on the question of what should be the rule of faith for the Christian. Keith and I both agreed from the outset of these debates, that the Scriptures alone were to be our rule, and only authority, in deciding controversies. Why, then, do the Reformed churches make use of creeds and confessions?

It will help to shed light on this subject if, by way of preliminary remarks, we consider certain distinctions between the Scriptures and creeds, regarding both their nature, and the end contemplated in their use. We hold that the Scriptures alone are a perfect rule of faith and life. Scripture is the perfect, and infallible, revelation of God's mind to His people. A creed is a man made declaration of how the church, acting in its teaching function, understands and interprets the Scriptures. Our own confession sets forth this distinction, "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence, may be deduced from Scripture ...," WCF, 1,6. A creed, then, is the church's declaration of those necessary deductions and interpretations that she believes may be gathered from Scripture. One of the doctrines of the Reformers was that of the sufficiency of Scripture. We say that it is sufficient for those ends for which God gave it. But, as James Bannerman points out, God, in His word, has other ends in view than merely to give a rule of faith. Bannerman writes, "there can be no doubt that, in the manner in which the revelation is made to us, and in the revelation itself, there are other objects contemplated; and among these that the Bible is intended to be a discipline and trial to faith, and for that purpose is intentionally less clear, and full, and explicit than it might have been. There is enough of light in the Bible for those who love the light; but there is enough of darkness for those that love the darkness better." It is no disparagement to the Scriptures, Bannerman says, "to assert that human summaries or exhibitions of truth may define the truth in a manner less liable to misinterpretation or perversion than the Scriptures themselves have done." Creeds, then, are instrumental in at least the following areas:

First, creeds help to establish, and maintain, unity between believers. This proposition recognizes that there will inevitably be doctrinal divisions between Christians. It is our position that creeds are not a cause, but are instead a result of division. It is impossible but that divisions will occur, given the vastness of the Biblical data, and the sinfulness, and party spirit of individual Christians. As Samuel Miller wrote, "Can a body of worshippers composed of Calvinists, Arminians, Pelagians, Arians, and Socinians, all pray, and preach, and commune together profitably and comfortably, each retaining the sentiments, feelings, and language

appropriate to his denomination? That would indeed make the house of God a miserable Babel.” Such an assembly, writes Miller, may talk much about church fellowship, but they will never enjoy such fellowship. Even in the church of the first century there were divisions, and this during a time when there were no creeds. Creeds were the necessary remedy for division. For instance, the Bible said that Jesus was the Son of God, and the Arians acknowledged this as readily as did the orthodox. But in what sense was Jesus the Son? The Arians, like their modern day counterparts Jehovah Witnesses, claimed that Jesus had a beginning in time. It took a council, and ultimately a creed, to show which group was approved of God, 1 Corinthians 11:19. Non-Biblical language like “co-equal,” “co-eternal,” and “of one substance” were terms that the Arians could not subscribe to, and thus proved to be the first line of defense against that heresy. Many other examples could be given throughout church history of how creeds rooted out false brethren, and united the church.

Secondly, creeds function as a means for the believer, who is seeking a fellowship of like minded believers, to readily identify, and join with a particular group. It is not enough to tell an enquirer that “We believe the Bible,” for every cult will profess as much. A published creed can be examined in a brief time, and will infallibly serve to acquaint those interested, with that system of truth that we understand the Bible to teach. The only alternative to a settled creed is to constantly be engaged in debates over virtually every doctrine of Scripture. Such wrangling and disputes might be expected between those of different denominations, but internecine debating is the sad experience of believers who have rejected creeds.

Thirdly, creeds and catechisms assist in the education of new Christians, and particularly in the training of young people. There is “a form of sound words,” 2 Tim. 1:13 that ought to be contended for, and creedal statements are perhaps the best vehicle for expressing those words. The modern church, especially those branches of it that have bought into the ecumenical movement, have increasingly put more emphasis on practice than on doctrine. This phenomena has been due, in large part, to a failure on the part of Christian families to catechize young people. There can be no sound practice if there is not, as a foundation, sound Biblical dogma.

In the fourth place it may be observed that creeds necessary to expose the shifts and deceits of those who while employing scriptural language, yet deny the truth that language was meant to convey. The Arians of the fourth century, and the modern day Jehovah Witnesses are probably the best examples of this. Arius was willing to use the exact words of Scripture, but would constantly put his own shade of meaning on the texts. The result brought heresy, and much confusion into the church. It was only through the creeds drawn up by the church of that age that finally restored peace and order to the people of God. According to Bannerman there were “new forms of unbelief” even during the period in which the Scriptures were being written, that called “for a re-statement in a new form of words of the faith professed by the church.” Bannerman gives three examples of how the church, even during the age of inspiration, “was compelled to recast and exhibit in new forms of language the truth formerly held.” First, regarding the doctrine long held, even by the Old Testament church, that Christ would be manifested to the world, John, in order to expose the error of the Docetists, who taught that this appearance would be Spiritual, and not real, gave witness in fresh language in both gospel, and epistle, that Christ had come in the flesh, John 1:14; 1 John 4:2,3. Secondly, Paul, in order to refute the error of Hymenaeus and Philetus, who used the words of Scripture to confess the resurrection, yet in principle denied it by

allegorizing it, and teaching that it had already happened, set forth the teaching anew in 1 Corinthians 15 in language that could not be mistaken. Thirdly, and perhaps the clearest example, is the account given in Acts 15 of false teaching concerning the doctrine of justification. The church, gathered together under the leadership of the apostles, re-cast “not the doctrines of Divine truth, but the form in which those doctrine are expressed.” We agree with Bannerman’s take on the above, that “The instances recorded in the Word of God of the re-statement and re-exhibition of the doctrines of Scripture in such a form as to meet and counteract new error, seem to be intended to be to future times patterns for imitation, rather than beacons to be avoided.”

Finally, creeds may be seen to be lawful because they are unavoidable. The most avowed despisers of creeds cannot avoid the use of them in practice. The expression “The Scriptures are our only rule only rule of faith,” is itself a creedal statement. The words are not found anywhere in Scripture, but yet are obviously intended to convey a particular interpretation of Scripture. Further, creeds are no different, in principle, that an exposition of Scripture given in a sermon. Unless the sermon is a verbatim reading of Scripture, it differs not at all from a creed. In both cases it is an interpretation of Scripture that is given, and intended in some sense to be binding on the hearers.

We conclude that it is both useful, and lawful, for a particular church to adopt a creed

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Miller, Samuel, **Doctrinal Integrity.**

Negative Keith Sharp

I must remind our readers of the proposition my friend affirms: “A local church may adopt a scriptural, uninspired creed as a standard of fellowship,” The key is the phrase, “as a standard of fellowship.” We’re not talking about a church teaching in writing what members of that congregation believe. The issue is the use of that uninspired document as a standard to determine fellowship. The Word of God alone must be the rule that determines our fellowship (1 John 1:3,7; 2 John 9-11).

My dear friend, as all Protestants, has spiritual schizophrenia. While affirming, “... the Scriptures alone are a perfect rule (standard - KS) of faith and practice,” he defends the right of a church to adopt an uninspired creed “as a standard (rule - KS) of fellowship.” By claiming to go by the Scriptures alone as an authoritative standard (“*solo Scriptura*”) yet demanding adherence to a human creed, Presbyterians, and all other Protestant denominations, betray the same hypocrisy as the scribes and Pharisees, who praised God with their lips, but taught “as doctrines the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:7-9).

Dave asserts that “human summaries” are “less liable to misinterpretation or perversion than the Scriptures themselves.” God intended for the Scriptures to be sufficiently clear to serve as our standard of faith and fellowship (Ephesians 3:4; 5:17; 2 John 9-11; Jude 3). The Protestant position is that a seventeenth century document written in the theological terms of uninspired schoolmen is easier to understand than the inspired Word of God faithfully translated into modern English.

Even if correct, this ignores the issue of authority. I may be able to offer an uninspired explanation or paraphrase of Scripture that is easier to understand than the passage itself, but it is the Scripture, not my paraphrase or explanation, nor that of the authors of creeds, that is divinely authorized to be our standard of faith, practice, and fellowship.

There are but two ultimate sources of authority - “from heaven or from men (Luke 20:1-2).” All heavenly authority has been given to the Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18) who alone is the supreme authority in His church (Ephesians 1:22-23). What He has authorized His people to believe and practice is in the New Testament (John 16:13-15; Ephesians 3:1-7). We dare not change this inspired standard (Galatians 1:6-9; 2 John 9-11). Where or when did the Lord Jesus Christ delegate authority to denominational bodies to write authoritative, doctrinal statements (creeds) to serve as standards of faith, practice, and fellowship?

When any man or group of men bind their uninspired opinions on others as a test of fellowship, they are exercising spiritual tyranny. They are destroying our liberty in Christ from human religious authority. None has the liberty to write an uninspired creed and set it up as an authoritative standard of fellowship (Galatians 2:3-5).

I am amazed one would assert, “creeds help to establish, and maintain, unity between believers.” If we all go to the same book, the Bible, with the same attitude, faith, we will believe, teach, and practice the same thing. We will “all speak the same thing, and ... be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Corinthians 1:10-13). Creeds may enforce unity of doctrine and practice within a sect or denomination, but they are the basis of maintaining the sinful divisions between sects and denominations. The very existence of these

sectarian bodies is sin (John 17:20-23; 1 Corinthians 1:10-13; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 4:4-6).

There would be no Jehovah's Witnesses without Watchtower publications. There would be no Mormons without the **Book of Mormon, Pearl of Great Price and Doctrine and Covenants**. Without the manual, there would be no Baptist. Remove the **Discipline** from the world, and the Methodist Church would pass out of existence. Take away the pope and the catechism, and Catholicism would cease to exist. Throw away **The Confession of Faith**, and there would not be a Presbyterian on the face of the earth. No one ever became a member of any sect or denomination without following something in addition to and other than the Bible. If all these sects really believe they are following the Bible, let them give up their uninspired creeds. They would all cease to exist.

If a teacher advocates heresy concerning Christ, expose his error from the Scriptures (1 Timothy 6:3-5; 2:5; Hebrews 2:9-18; 1 John 4:2-3; John 1:1-3,14; Colossians 1:15-17; Hebrews chapter one), but the Scriptures, not any uninspired creed, is the standard to which we must appeal (2 John 9). I am completely unconcerned whether my teaching accords with the falsely so-called "Apostolic Creed," the Nicene Creed, The **Westminster Confession of Faith**, or any other uninspired document. I care deeply that I can prove that everything I believe, teach, and practice is authorized by the Scriptures (Ibid).

If I make my sermons, class comments, articles, etc., the authoritative standard by which fellowship is to be determined, then indeed I am guilty of having set up a human creed. I will be guilty of the same sin as the Presbyterian Church (and all denominations). We'll all be wrong. But those who attend the Tri-County Church of Christ know that everything I teach should be questioned on the basis of the Scriptures by those who hear or read my lessons. We even ask for questions about the lesson after each Sunday morning worship assembly. We heed the apostolic command, "Test all things; hold fast what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21). The Scriptures are our only standard of fellowship.

If a congregation settles questions of faith and fellowship by appealing to **The Confession of Faith**, then that is their creed. If a congregation settles these matters by appeal to the Scriptures, then the Bible is their creed. If a congregation is unwilling to alter its teaching, practice or worship when they find themselves out of harmony with the Scriptures, they are following human tradition. If they are willing to change any and all things to conform to new truth learned from the Bible, the Bible is their creed.

Yes, churches of Christ are known for debates and lively discussions, even among ourselves. So was the first century church guided by the apostles (Acts 15). No dissenting voices are allowed in an enslaved society, but among free people there is constant dialogue and even spirited disagreement. I pray that my brethren never surrender their freedom to uninspired creed writers (Galatians 2:3-5).

The use of uninspired literature as an aid in teaching is not the issue. There is no difference in principle between uninspired oral teaching and uninspired written teaching. All are scripturally authorized (Mark 16:15; Matthew 28:19-20; 2 Timothy 2:2), but we must use none as our rule of faith and fellowship (2 John 9). How can we "hold fast the form of sound words," apostolic words (2 Timothy 1:13), by using a nonapostolic document as our rule of faith?

Yes, the first century apostles met and vanquished false teachers with new revelation

appropriate to the error encountered. But there is no parallel between the apostolic writing of new Scripture to answer a freshly encountered error and the production of uninspired, authoritative creeds as a supposed safeguard against error unless human wisdom is equal to divine wisdom (Isaiah 55:8-9; 1 Corinthians 1:25). Since Scripture is our all-sufficient standard of faith, practice, and fellowship (Galatians 1:6-9; Colossians 3:17; 1 Timothy 6:3-5; 2 Timothy 1:13; 3:16-17; 1 John 1:3,7; 2 John 9-11), any possible error in belief or work is answered in the Scriptures. Any doctrine or practice unauthorized by the Scriptures is sinful simply because the Scriptures do not authorize it (Ibid).

The entire reason for creedalism is lack of faith in the Word of God as an all sufficient standard of faith. What the inspired Word of God cannot do, provide an adequate standard to safeguard our faith and fellowship, an uninspired production of schoolmen can do. Creedalism is practical infidelity. Inspired Scripture is our all-sufficient standard (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Whatever happened to the spirit of the Bereans?

These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men. (Acts 17:11-12)

Poor Bereans. They lived sixteen hundred years before **The Confession of Faith** and just had to depend on the inspired Word of God to determine the truth. Undoubtedly they accepted all kinds of heretics, for they didn't have the benefit of **The Confession of Faith** as their authoritative standard.

The New Testament is our standard of faith and fellowship (2 John 9-11). If God destroyed without mercy both the men who would usurp Aaron's office and those who murmured over their deaths (Numbers chapter 16), what will He do with those who arrogantly presume to take the office of His Son to authoritatively set the bounds of fellowship?

Response David Landon

My response to Keith on the subject of creeds is two-fold. First, he errs concerning the nature of creeds. Secondly, he stumbles over the fact of their inescapability.

On the first point we say again, that the Bible is not a creed. Scripture was given by God to be to His Church a perfect, infallible, and permanent rule of faith. We admit that with the completion of the New Testament canon, this rule is complete, and final, and, further, that it would be a great sin for any Christian, or body of Christians, to add to, or subtract from, this rule. A creed, on the other hand, is a written declaration of how a church interprets that rule. There will never be true unity of faith between professing Christians upon the bare acknowledgment that the Bible is our only perfect rule of faith, for who would deny it? Arians, Socinians, and Universalists all confess the same. The Church must interpret that rule; that is, it must have a creed. "The true principle of Church union," writes Bannerman, "demands that the Church shall take not the Bible, nor any extracts from the Bible, to declare its confession of faith, but that it shall take the confession first from its own heart, and then translate it into its own language. In no other way can it give a right assurance of its own belief to its own members, or receive a right assurance of theirs." Keith claims that, "If we all go to the same book, the Bible, with the same attitude, faith, we will believe, teach, and practice the same thing." What he means is that if we all go to Scripture with his interpretation of it, we will believe the same thing. In the first age of the Church there were no creeds, and yet there were a great number of divisions. And why may not a believer go to the Bible in an attitude of faith, and an honest heart, and come away believing in election, limited atonement, perseverance of the saints, and infant baptism? A great number of God's people, a number that no man can tally, have done just that.

But Keith says that there would be no sects were there no creeds. There would be no Presbyterians without the Confession of Faith, no Jehovah Witness without the Watchtower publications, no Methodists without the Discipline, etc. This is the logical fallacy *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* (after this, therefore because of this). Just because one event follows another, the former did not necessarily cause the latter. We need more than Keith's say so to prove that sects were sprung from creeds. Besides, it can be demonstrated that in most cases a society of believers came to a uniform understanding of Scripture first, and then, in an endeavor to establish and promote that unity between themselves, wrote their creed. (For, as Amos asks, "can two walk together, except they be agreed.") There were Calvinists before the Confession, they were called Augustinians and Jansenists. There were Baptists before the Manual, they were called Anabaptists. And before Jehovah Witnesses there were Arians.

But Keith's main objection, he tells us, is not so much with our creeds, but with our making them authoritative. He has no problem with a church compiling a list of their doctrinal beliefs so long as they do not make this list (creed) authoritative (a basis for fellowship). Here is a marvelous thing, that we should make a list of those doctrines that we believe are God's own truth taken from His very word, and yet that we should esteem them so lightly that we might, at the same time, hold out the right hand of fellowship to those holding different, or even contrary views.

As Presbyterians, we believe that the **Westminster Confession of Faith** best sets forth

that system of doctrine that is found in unsystematic form in the Bible. But we do not use that standard as a religious test for those seeking communicant membership with us. All that is required is a credible profession of faith, including belief in the trinity, baptism in a Bible believing church, repentance of sin, faith in Christ, and a promise to submit to God's word as found in the Old and New Testaments. Those, however, who desire to be ministers are required to hold that system of doctrine taught in the confession as being a faithful testimony against the false gospels of Pelagianism, and Arminianism.

Creeds, then, are inescapable. All that remains is to demonstrate that Keith also has a creed in addition to the Bible, and that it is authoritative. It is easy to prove that Keith has an extra-Biblical creed. His first article reads as follows, "The Scriptures teach that all men are by inherent nature innocent of all sin, able to avoid sinning, and able to choose either salvation or condemnation." Keith's last article is the proposition that he affirms in this debate. There are twelve other articles between these two. They are the fourteen propositions he has defended these past few years. This (at the very least) is his creed. Certainly he considers these articles fundamental truths, else why waste paper and ink defending them? Keith clearly gives the lie to his own proposition here, affirming on the one hand that the Bible should be our only creed, and yet, at the same time, vigorously defending fourteen articles that are not word-for-word quotations from Scripture, but are his interpretations only.

Does Keith make his creed of fourteen articles authoritative? He would say no, but consider the following possible scenario,- Keith's assistant minister at the Tri-County Church of Christ comes to Keith one day and says, "I have read the debates between yourself and Mr. Landon, and I am now persuaded of the Reformed doctrines, and beginning today I intend to preach Calvinism from the Tri-County pulpit. We would see on that day how authoritative, and divisive, Keith's creed really is.

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Bannerman, James, **The Church of Christ.**

Affirmative Keith Sharp

I met David N. Landon at a Bible study in Syracuse, New York almost nine years ago. We have become good friends, although our doctrinal differences are many and basic. He is an honorable man and a worthy debate opponent.

This is our fourteenth and last written debate over the differences between the Reformed Presbyterian Church and the church of Christ. These debates will be published as a book by Faith and Facts.

In this I affirm, **A local church must recognize the Scriptures alone as its only creed.** A “local church” is a congregation of Christians who regularly worship together and collectively do the work pertaining to the kingdom of God. "Scriptures" are the writings inspired of God that compose the Bible. A "creed" is "a brief authoritative doctrinal formula" (Webster. 533).

The pivotal word is the term “authoritative.” I defend the right, yes duty, of any man or group of people to state, orally or in writing, what they believe (1 Peter 3:15). This is, in fact, what I am doing. But when such a statement, whether oral or written, becomes an authoritative standard to determine fellowship, it is a creed.

This is what Presbyterians and other denominations have.

Our church holds to the historic Christian faith, expressed in the Early Church in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, and, following the Protestant Reformation, in the Westminster Confession of Faith & Catechisms (web site).

These creeds are used to determine fellowship.

.... we are not to require of penitent believer’s (sic) asking admission to Christ’s church any of the heads of our creed, except such as are fundamental to Christian redemption and holy living; but, upon their sincere adoption of the latter, the laity are to be admitted to all the privileges of the visible church. It is only of the pastors and doctors (teachers - KS) of the church and of such other officers as exercise spiritual rule therein, that we might rightfully require the adoption of our whole creed, as containing the system of doctrine set forth in the Holy Scriptures. (Dabney, 19-20)

Thus, fellowship in a local Presbyterian Church, depends upon accepting the portions of The Confession of Faith deemed “fundamental to Christian redemption and holy living.” The Presbyterian clergy must accept their “whole creed.”

I submit seven objections to these uninspired creeds.

Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone)

The Scriptures alone are the creed of the church Jesus Christ built. They exclusively determine what we must believe, teach, and practice and whom we may fellowship (Colossians 3:17; John 16:13-15; Ephesians 3:1-7; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 1 John 1:3,7). Upon penalty of condemnation by God, we must neither add to nor diminish from this divine standard (Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32; 29:29; Proverbs 30:6; Galatians 1:6-9; 1 Peter 4:11; 2 John 9; Revelation 22:18-19). Every uninspired creed both adds to and takes from the Scriptures. If they

were the same as the Scriptures, they would be useless. It is just as sinful to add another standard of fellowship, a creed, as it is to add another supposed revelation, such as the Qur'an or the Book of Mormon.

Human Wisdom versus Divine Wisdom

Uninspired creeds elevate man's wisdom above God's. Divine wisdom is as much higher than human wisdom "as the heavens are higher than the earth" (Isaiah 55:8-9). That portion of God's wisdom that seems the weakest is wiser than anything man ever has or ever shall devise (1 Corinthians 1:25). But creed writers arrogantly suppose they can improve upon the divine standard, the Scriptures, as a standard of fellowship. Although God's will is made sufficiently plain in the Scriptures so that all can understand it (Ephesians 3:4; 5:17), purveyors of human creeds think they can express divine truth more clearly than God Himself expressed it in Scripture.

Human Tradition versus Divine Tradition

Creeds of men are human traditions. The term "tradition" means "*handing down or over*" (Arndt and Gingrich. 621). The source from which it is handed down determines whether we should accept it as a standard or not. The Jews followed the traditions handed down from their fathers (Matthew 15:1-2; Mark 7:1-5), thinking they were following Moses (John 9:28-29). In reality acceptance of the traditions of their fathers led them to reject the commandments God gave through Moses (Matthew 15:3-6; Mark 7:8-13). They were thus hypocrites, and their worship was vain (Matthew 15:7-9; Mark 7:6-7). We must follow the tradition given Christ's apostles (2 Thessalonians 3:6), the New Testament Scriptures (Ephesians 3:1-7). Even the so-called "Apostles' Creed" is but a compilation of second to fourth century human traditions (Schaff. 2:529-33). Our standard must be from heaven, not from men (Matthew 21:25). Catholics admit they place the traditions of the fathers on an equal footing with Scripture. Protestants, who claim to follow "*sola Scriptura*" (Scripture alone), yet make the creeds of men (the traditions of the fathers) their authoritative statements of faith, are as hypocritical as the Jews and also worship in vain.

Products of Political Bodies

The *Nicene Creed*, produced by the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325), a gathering of perhaps 318 bishops, occupying ecclesiastical offices unauthorized by the New Testament, summoned by and presided over by the Roman Emperor, Constantine, who at the time had not even been baptized (Ibid. 3:623-31), is about 225 years too young to be our standard of faith. The *Westminster Confession of Faith*, along with the *Larger* and *Shorter Catechisms*, was drawn up by British Parliament in 1647 (**Confession**. xviii), over fifteen centuries too late to be from God. It is remarkable that people will submit their consciences to dictates drawn up, not by inspired apostles and prophets, but by uninspired, apostate bishops, an unconverted Roman Emperor, and British politicians! Verily, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Divisive

Presbyterians agree the *Westminster Confession of Faith* accurately states the truth of Scripture, but Catholics, Methodists, Baptists, and Episcopalians strenuously dissent. Catholics praise the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, but Protestants howl in protest. Methodists speak warmly of the *Discipline*, but all others give it the cold shoulder. Each Baptist group has its *Manual*, but others will have nothing of it. Christ prayed that all believers in Him be one (John 17:20-23). Paul pleaded that we have no sectarian divisions but that we all speak the same thing (1 Corinthians 1:10-13). He revealed we must all have unity of faith (Ephesians 4:4-6). Is there not one standard all can hold in common? Indeed there is! All claim to believe the Scriptures are the inspired Word of God, and the Protestants even claim to believe in it's all sufficiency (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Why not set aside the divisive creeds of men and follow only the Scriptures?

Sectarian

The “works of the flesh” (Galatians 5:19-21) will exclude one from heaven. One such sinful work is “heresies,” otherwise translated “parties” (**ASV**), “factions” (**NASB, ISV**), or “divisions” (**ESV**). The term denotes “*a religious sect, faction*” (Mounce. 1074). A denomination is simply an organized sect. The Bible never made anyone a member of any denomination or sect. It takes the *Catechism* to make a Catholic, the *Discipline* to make a Methodist, and the *Westminster Confession of Faith* to make a Presbyterian. If we follow the Scriptures only we will only be Christians (1 Peter 4:16). The basis of the damnable sin of sectarianism is human creeds.

Lack of Faith

We agree that faith in Christ and His Word is the means of our salvation (John 3:36; 5:24; 6:35,68-69; 12:48). That Word, contained in Scripture, is understandable (Ephesians 3:4; 5:11), all sufficient for our faith and practice (2 Timothy 3:16-17), and the only basis of fellowship with God and His people (1 John 1:3,7; 2 John 9-11). To accept an uninspired creed as a basis of faith and standard of fellowship is to demonstrate a lack of faith in the Word of Christ.

Conclusion

Just recently an old friend used the existence of so many denominations with their contradictory doctrines as an excuse not to study with me. The sinful divisions between professed believers in Christ is perhaps the single most potent source of unbelief. To heal these divisions, we must begin by both acknowledging and following a common standard of faith and practice, the inspired Scriptures. No human creed can ever be the basis of unity. They all must be eradicated as authoritative standards. **A local church must recognize the Scriptures alone as its only creed.**

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Negative David Landon

I too consider Keith a good friend. It is a relationship that has flourished nine years in spite of our doctrinal differences. I am thankful that creeds are not *necessarily* divisive.

Keith, in the third paragraph of his affirmative, demonstrates that he too has a creed. His very proposition fits the definition of *creed* that he gives from Webster. His proposition is “a brief. . . doctrinal formula.” And certainly the word “must” in his proposition makes this doctrinal formula *authoritative*.

Although it is evident that creeds are inescapable, I will answer Keith’s seven objections to them. As we consider them let the reader keep in mind that every one of these objections might, with equal weight, be given against a sermon delivered from the pulpit, as against a creed.

Sola Scriptura. The same folks that brought us Sola Scriptura brought us the creeds. There is no contradiction. They realized that while the Scripture was a perfect, infallible, and sufficient *rule of faith*, it still needed to be interpreted. A creed fulfils that necessity. An uninspired creed neither adds to, nor takes from Scripture anymore than an uninspired sermon does. Would Keith be willing for anyone to fill his pulpit so long as they confessed Scripture as their sole rule of faith? Certainly not! Keith would inquire of their interpretation of Scripture, that is, of their creed.

Human wisdom. "Uninspired creeds," writes Keith, "elevate man's wisdom above God's." The same may be said for uninspired sermons. To the extent that creeds are a faithful interpretation of Scripture they express God's wisdom.

Human tradition. As with the above objection, human sermons might also be nothing more than a vehicle for human tradition. Keith would be more consistent with his position if, when delivering a sermon, he just read the Scriptures. But then, “If they were the same as the Scriptures, they would be useless.”

Products of politicians. Churches, and pastors of churches, have been called upon to give a sermon upon some momentous occasion far more often than they have to compose a creed. Once again, if Keith’s arguments prove anything, they prove too much. For the record, Presbyterians do not submit their consciences to uninspired, apostate creed-makers, but to the Scriptures alone, and to creeds (and sermons,) only as far as they can be shown to be faithful to Scripture.

Divisive. There is greater unanimity than Keith supposes between the various creeds. In spite of the large number of confessions produced by the Reformers, there was complete agreement in fundamentals as Peter Hall demonstrates in his book, The Harmony of the Protestant Confessions. Nor did the Reformers “howl in protest” when Rome gave the world her confessions, as it made it possible for the first time to know precisely where She stood on certain doctrines. Divisions existed long before there were creeds. As Dabney points out in his Discussions, “the apostles’ testimony did not unite all professed believers in their own day.” Dabney quotes the fourth century Epiphanius, who had enumerated eighty heresies prior to the Nicene creed.

Sectarian. In his consideration of Christian communion, and of the adverse effects of divisions and sects, Keith shows that he misunderstands both the nature of true unity, and also

the God appointed means of healing divisions. Primarily, Christian unity is a unity that is found between all who have called upon the Lord, and are indwelt by His Spirit. There is also a unity between Christians in the visible church, and, according to the book Alexander and Rufus, published by the Associate Synod of North America in 1862, there are three ways that unity manifests itself. First, “the visible communion of Christians in any particular church consists in their declared agreement to adhere to one public profession of the Christian religion.” All members should glorify God with one mouth, Heb. 4:14; 10:23; Rom. 15:6. Second, that profession should be of the whole Christian religion. “The authority of the Divine testimony, which binds us to receive any part, binds us equally to receive the whole.” (See Acts 3:22.) Thirdly, “in order to the communion of persons in a particular church, it is necessary that the articles of the public profession which she has attained and which constitute the matter of her communion, be ascertained by her creed ...” The Associate Synod continues, “It is vain to say, that the confession of a particular church is a human thing: for, candidly interpreted, it may be found to contain nothing but the undoubted truth of God's word. It is either possible for men to express these truths in their own words, or it is not. If it is not possible, then His words cannot be understood ... But if it be possible for men to express the truths of the Scripture in their own words, then the doctrines and instructions contained in a confession, may be no other than the truths of God's own word; and, if they are actually no other, then a church may warrantably require of her members, and of such as desire admission to her communion, a public consent to her whole confession, nor can that assent be refused without impiety.” In such a case a church is not requiring consent to doctrines and commandments of men but, in truth, to the doctrines and commandments of God.

We deny, moreover, Keith's assertion that creeds and catechisms make sects. “No society,” according to the above quoted book, “ought to be called [an unlawful sect] while it can be shown that it subsists as a separate society for no other end, than for the maintaining of something in the doctrine, worship or government of the church which belongs to the Christian religion as delivered in the word of God, or for exhibiting a testimony against prevailing errors and corruptions which the scripture requires the catholic Church to condemn.” On this ground it may be said that the Reformed Presbyterian Church is not a sect, and that the Westminster Confession of faith, so far from being the cause of a sect, is one of the means by which our particular society of Christians bears witness against the errors of those societies of professors that are truly sectarian.

Lack of Faith. Keith writes that “To accept an uninspired creed ... is to demonstrate a lack of faith in the Word of Christ.” This assertion flies in the face of the history of the Reformation. Dozens of creeds were written during these centuries, and Christians, almost to a man, subscribed to one or more of them, and yet that same age was also an age of great faith in the Scriptures, thousands being martyred rather than deny the Word of Christ. Obviously these things are not contradictory. It was well understood that Scripture alone was a perfect rule of faith for the whole church in all ages. But the Reformers also knew that Christians differed notoriously from one another on the interpretation of Scripture. Therefore, according to Bannerman, a creed “is the only possible expedient, in the absence of an inspired living umpire, such as the Pope claims falsely to be, by which fidelity to truth can be reconciled with cooperation. A creed, then, is a means for enabling Christians to understand each other. It is a

human exposition of what is supposed to be the exact meaning of the Scriptures; and differs from those usually delivered from the pulpit only in being more carefully and accurately made by the assistance of many minds." A creed then, is as lawful as a sermon, but in some respects (those that concern the ends for which we have creeds) they are to be preferred, for greater thought and time go into them.

We further answer Keith's charge of a lack of faith by asking the question, what is the word, or counsel, of God? Our confession reads, "The whole counsel of God .. is either expressly set down in Scripture, or, by good and necessary consequence, may be deduced from Scripture ... " According to this, good and necessary consequences are as much the counsel of God as are express statements of Scripture. Bannerman, in his second volume on the Church of Christ shows how heretics have always insisted on explicit statements in Scripture rather than the inferences that may be drawn from them. "Errors are covered by an appeal to the letter of Scripture, while the real sense and meaning of it have been evaded or denied." Consequences, according to the confession, must be necessary, as well as good. Such a consequence "forces itself upon any reasonable and unprejudiced mind as inevitable." An example from Scripture would be Christ's charge of unbelief (the same charge that Keith lays at our door) against the Sadducees for not drawing the good and necessary inference from Exodus 3:1-10,12 concerning the resurrection of the dead.

Sinful divisions are **not** "the most potent source of unbelief." That would be the heart. If Christians were perfectly united, Keith's friend would have pointed to the divisions between world religions as an excuse not to study with him.

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Response Keith Sharp

Yes, Dave and I are close friends, but we have no fellowship. A human creed “separates the best of friends” (cf. Proverbs 16:28).

I am disappointed that my dear friend has never come to grips with the issue. I plainly noted in my affirmative what makes creeds authoritative and therefore sinful usurpations of divine authority.

Thus, fellowship in a local Presbyterian Church, depends upon accepting the portions of The Confession of Faith deemed “fundamental to Christian redemption and holy living.” The Presbyterian clergy must accept their “whole creed.”

Dave doesn’t deny this. If I ever set up anything I author as a standard of fellowship, I will be guilty of the same hypocrisy as the Protestant creed writers.

I will never employ my proposition, “A local church must recognize the Scriptures alone as its only creed,” as a standard to determine faith, practice, and fellowship. The many Scriptures I used to sustain it are part of the only true standard.

Sola Scriptura. Interpreting Scripture is not the issue; setting up an interpretation as an authoritative standard is the issue. The Scriptures are the authoritative standard, and one who claims to believe this but adopts a human creed as his standard of fellowship is just as hypocritical as the Jews who claimed to be disciples of Moses (John 9:28) but rejected Moses for their uninspired traditions (Matthew 15:3-9; Mark 7:6-13). If a preacher disagrees with what I preach or write and can show me from the Scriptures I’m wrong, I will be delighted for him to preach where I attend.

Human wisdom. When I make my sermons a standard of fellowship, Dave will have a point.

Human tradition. When the congregation where I preach accepts the traditional teaching and practice of churches of Christ as our standard, we’ll be wrong too.

Products of politicians. If Christians make a sermon of a popular evangelist preached on a momentous occasion a standard of fellowship, they sin. One cannot be a Presbyterian without accepting at least the parts of the **Westminster Confession of Faith** considered “fundamental to Christian redemption and holy living,” and without the **Confession of Faith** there wouldn’t be a Presbyterian on earth.

Divisive. The fundamentals of unity are one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God (Ephesians 4:4-6). Don’t try to tell me all Protestants have one body, one hope, one faith, or one baptism. Creeds crystallized previously existing divisions, making them much harder to overcome. Indeed, Protestants do howl in protest against papal infallibility, praying to Mary, veneration of saints, etc., found in the **Catechism**. The apostles’ doctrine united all who really believed; others were not actually of them (1 John 2:19).

Sectarian. My understanding of the unity of the Spirit doesn’t harmonize with **Alexander and Rufus**, but it does with the inspired apostle Paul. Unless we believe and teach the same thing, we don’t have the unity of the Spirit (Ephesians 4:1-6; 1 Corinthians 1:10-13). The only standard we can all accept is the Scriptures. Any standard of faith and fellowship drawn

up by uninspired men is from man rather than God and is sinful in and of itself. It would be laughable were souls not at stake to accuse Christians of “impiety” because we refuse to confess articles drawn up by uninspired men. I will confess any truth plainly stated or implied in the inspired Scriptures but only because it is surely taught therein.

No person can learn how to become a member of a denomination or sect without the appropriate human creed. Banish all uninspired creeds, and all believers would simply be Christians. Creeds make sects as surely as the doctrine of Christ makes Christians.

Lack of Faith. Martyrdom does not prove faith in the Scriptures; it demonstrates faith in one’s cause. Many have pitifully perished for unworthy causes. Servetus was burned alive at the stake in Geneva October 27th, 1533 at the hands of Calvin and the Reformers partly because he denied there are three Persons in the Godhead (Schaff. 8:715-86). How many Jews suffered martyrdom in Jerusalem in A.D. 70 because they refused to believe Christ? (Matthew 24:15-22)

No, the creeds are not the only expedient means to assure cooperation short of the pope. In the first place, to be expedient, i.e., helpful, profitable, a practice must be divinely authorized (1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23), and there is no divine authority for an uninspired standard of faith and fellowship. The expedient means to assure cooperation is the willingness to openly, honestly discuss any divisive issue with inspired truth as the standard to settle the controversy (Acts chapter 15). It worked then, and it will work now.

Of course I know the Reformed Presbyterian Church claims to accept inspired Scripture as their standard. But when they demand acceptance of any or all of a series of uninspired documents as standards of fellowship, their practice contradicts their claims, exposing hypocrisy.

Yes, “*good and necessary inference*” is authoritative, because what we necessarily infer is actually implied by inspired Scripture (e.g., Acts 17:2-3). To reject such conclusions is unbelief, not because it is a rejection of our inferences but because it is a denial of the implications of Scripture.

Of course all unbelief springs from defects of the heart. But what are the chief stumbling blocks? In the shadow of the cross, the Savior pleaded with His Father:

I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me (John 17:20-21).

I’ll let Dave argue with the Son of God whether division among professed believers is a potent source of unbelief.

Indeed, “A local church must recognize the Scriptures alone as its only creed.”

Work Cited

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