

## **I. Introduction**

The same God who spoke to the prophets and apostles established his church and ordained these first officers to begin the work of preaching, teaching, and passing on his revelation to others to come after them. The church of God, therefore, in keeping with this calling, has throughout history declared authoritatively what the teaching of the Holy Spirit is in a systematic creeds and confessions. When false teachings have arisen in the church or in the world, the church's ministers have sought to outline in corporate expressions what the word of God has to say on subjects in question. Although no merely human writings can be considered infallible, Christians today would be foolhardy to think that they are the first to understand the Bible correctly after our forefathers in the faith have wrestled with God's revelation for nearly two millennia. Our initial reaction to new doctrine should be one of suspicion.

My aim for this short essay is not that it serve as a substitute for the great historic creeds; nor would I suggest that a personal statement is equivalent to the common confession of the church. Rather I will attempt to summarize in a systematic, clear, and understandable way the main loci of biblical doctrine in keeping with the best and most orthodox traditions of the church while casting aside doctrines which have no foundation in Holy Scripture. This is a statement of Scriptural truth, not a defense. I write as one who comes from an anti-creedal and thoroughly Arminian background, whom the Spirit has since drawn to confess that system of doctrine historically known as the Reformed Faith. The term "Reformed" is derived from the Protestant Reformation, although the system of doctrine to which it refers is quite simply Christianity's most consistent and biblical form. This Reformed system of doctrine is most preeminently summarized in the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms.

## II. Holy Scripture

The God of nature is revealed in all of creation so that all men know him intuitively both in themselves and in the world around them. This knowledge gained from general revelation is not enough, however, for man's salvation. Therefore God revealed his will to his church in history and caused it to be written down, preserved, and propagated for the establishment and protection of truth among his people against all the dangers of the world, the flesh and the devil. This written revelation of God is necessary for the church today because prophecy has ceased. The Holy Scriptures are a fully-sufficient guide for all things pertaining to godliness and salvation for the church, her only final rule for faith and practice.

God's special revelation was mediated through God's chosen ambassadors, the prophets and apostles. In this process of inspiration the human authors used various means and sources, either directly or indirectly from God, and wrote according to their own personal style. But they were so guided by the Holy Spirit that every word of the finished product is the pure word of God. The Holy Scriptures consist of the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments. The church has confessed these books to be the word of God from the earliest times, not based on any authority of her own to determine what is Scripture but rather from her duty to recognize and confess those writings which God has inspired based on God's own testimony evident in the books. Although the evidence of divine inspiration rests objectively in the text of Scripture itself, only the inward witness of the Holy Spirit in our hearts can fully persuade and assure us that it is the word of God. Nothing may ever be added to these sixty-six books until the end of time.

The God-breathed Holy Scriptures were entirely without error in anything which they asserted in the original autographs penned in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. In this way they are to be distinguished from all other human writings. This inerrancy and infallibility extends not only to matters concerning salvation but also to any historic or scientific data that the Scriptures provide. Although the manuscripts which exist today in the original languages are not without minor scribal errors, God has so providentially preserved the Scriptures for his church in every age that the true original text may be distinguished in the existing manuscripts.

Although some parts of Holy Scripture are more difficult to interpret than others, there is no essential doctrine for man's salvation which may not, with the proper means of study, be clearly understood in one part or another. The only infallible rule of interpreting the Scripture is by the Scripture. This means a teaching which is difficult in one part is more clearly expounded in another part. It is therefore no surprise that diverse churches around the world and throughout history that have approached the Scriptures reverently as God's word have differed very little in their doctrine.

### **III. God**

God is a Spirit who is entirely above human understanding so that we may never fully comprehend him. Yet we may distinguish him by various attributes. Some of these attributes have no correlation in man. These have been called *incommunicable*. To this group belong God's infinity, eternity, and impassivity. Others of God's attributes known as *communicable* find some expression in man in a reduced, reflective, and finite form. To this group belong God's being, wisdom, power, holiness, goodness, justice, and truth. As a Spirit God is without parts or passions. As infinite God is without limit in any of his attributes in any aspect or dimension. As eternal God is entirely outside of time. As

impassive God experiences no change, no succession of decrees, thoughts or emotions. As truth it is impossible for God to lie. In God's "goodness" both his covenant mercy and his universal love for his creation are included. As just God must operate in accordance with the laws inherent in his nature.

### **III. The Trinity**

This one God exists in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who exist from all eternity of one divine essence, equal in power and glory. The traditional term *persons* is used for lack of a better word because of the inadequacy of human language to describe God. The Bible's teaching on the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is that there is only one God, but that these three are God. They are not three Gods, nor is any one subordinate to the other in essence or attributes. Some orthodox theologians have described the three persons of the Godhead as being of one substance yet of three distinct modes of subsistence. Regarding order in the Trinity, although the Scriptures describe the Son as *begotten* of the Father and the Spirit as *proceeding* from the Father and the Son, this is to be understood in terms of their persons and not that the divine essence of either the Son or the Spirit is in any way derived.

### **IV. Creation**

The Scriptures teach that this triune God created the heavens and the earth with all that they contain out of nothing in the space of six ordinary days. God's ultimate purpose in creation is his own glory, as a reflection of his own excellence and perfections. God's creation was originally without blemish or defect. As his crowning work of achievement on the sixth day God created man male and female, after his own image. The image of God in man consists of the whole person, both body and soul. He created male and female sexes as complimentary mates or partners. God wrote his entire moral law on

their hearts, placing them in the Garden of Eden. This law is identical with that later summarized in the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. God made a covenant with the man, *Adam*, for himself and in him representatively for his posterity promising them eternal life and glorification if he perfectly obeyed all his commandments, including one particular commandment not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This covenant is known as the *covenant of works*. Since creation God continues to *providentially* preserve and govern all his creation.

### **V. The Fall of Man and Sin**

Being tempted and deceived by the serpent, our first parents sinned against God by eating the forbidden fruit. At this sin all mankind who are descended naturally from Adam sinned in him as their federal or representative head. By the fall all of mankind naturally descended lost communion with God and fell under his wrath and curse. As a punishment for the guilt of having sinned in Adam, every naturally-conceived child that comes into the world inherits sinful corruption in his human nature, experiences all the pain and miseries of this life, and deserves eternal hell-fire by nature. As a result of the fall mankind is not only guilty in Adam; we prove our guilt and compound it by sinning against God every day. Sin is any transgression of or lack of conformity to the law of God. The corruption of man's nature extends not only to his physical body but to the entire person to such an extent that he is entirely unable by nature to do, wish, or think anything for his own spiritual good.

### **VI. Christ**

God the Father, in his rich mercy, according to his decree before the foundation of the world, and for his own glory, sent his eternal Son to save his elect individuals out of every nation in the world out of the great mass of human sinners deserving only

damnation. According to this plan, Christ represented all the elect as their federal head in the New Covenant, also known as the *covenant of grace*. He took upon himself a human nature in the womb of the Virgin Mary so that the divine and human natures were inseparably joined forever in one person without any confusion of the two, each nature acting according to its own properties. As the God-man, only Christ Jesus is capable of reconciling God and man. This Mediator declared the word of the Lord for the salvation of sinners, lived a life of perfect obedience to the law of God, and at Calvary suffered the penalty due to his chosen people, making satisfaction to God the Father for their sins. By this death he perfected forever all those who shall be saved. He rose again on the third day, and ascended into heaven some time later where he reigns as King at the right hand of the Father, making continual intercession for his people.

## **VII. The New Birth and Justification**

As King seated at the right hand of the Father, Christ Jesus subdues his elect to himself, prophetically drawing them by his word and Spirit, bringing them into saving communion with him in his own appointed time. As a result of his inward spiritual calling elect sinners are made willing and able to trust in Jesus as he is revealed in Scripture. The sinner is entirely passive in regeneration until the Spirit works faith in him and thereby unites him to Christ. At the moment a regenerate man believes in Christ, he is immediately acquitted and forgiven of all his sin and counted righteous in God's sight because God counts Christ's righteousness for him just as his sins were laid on Christ at Calvary. The righteousness of Christ counted for the sinner includes Christ's active obeying of the law of God throughout his whole life and all his sufferings, especially on the cross. The believer stands in Christ where Adam fell. His faith is not the ground of

his forgiveness or salvation, but only the instrument by which he is united to Christ who saves him. Justification is essentially the same in the Old and New Covenants.

### **VIII. Sanctification and Perseverance**

The grace of God in regeneration which puts a sinner in a right standing with God also makes him progressively more and more holy throughout his life in conformity to God's image. This sanctification is never perfected in this life, and can at times experience horrible setbacks, but the regenerate believer is never left to wallow in sin without the Spirit drawing him to repentance and leading him on progressively to greater obedience so that he may never fully and finally fall away from the grace of God. God infallibly preserves his elect to the end, not due to any strength of their own, but only by his Spirit's continuing work of sanctification in them. This does not mean, however, that no true child of God may have his own personal assurance of salvation reduced or shaken for a time.

### **IX. The Holy Spirit**

The Holy Spirit, being eternally and equally God, proceeding from the Father and the Son as regards his person, is the Vicar of Christ on earth in God's economy of redemption. He regenerates, indwells, sanctifies, and endows the saints with all the gifts and graces of communion with God including assurance of salvation. He illuminates the Scriptures to the understanding of believers. He fills up the physical absence of Christ, uniting his body to him and his members to one another. He brings conviction of sin, comfort, and joy in Christ. He restrains sin in the world of unbelievers, so that they are not as evil as they could otherwise be. In conforming believers more and more to the image of God, the Spirit works fruits of godliness in them in conformity God's nature. He anoints the church with gifts for her edification. The Holy Spirit is none other than

the personal God, *blowing where* and when *he wills*, and is not to be identified as an impersonal force or as one who can be perceived merely by human emotions.

## **X. The Church**

In accordance with his eternal plan of redemption, God has separated a covenant people of every age from the world to worship him and to proclaim his kingdom on earth. This church of God was once identified with a particular ethnic group of those descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, but is now inclusive of every nation under the New Covenant. The essential nature of salvation and life in the Spirit is the same in the Old and New Covenants, although under the New Covenant the people of God experience a greater fullness of the revelation of God's mercy in Christ and liberty from the types and shadows of the old dispensation, which God gave to point the saints of old to the coming Messiah. To his church the Lord gave a charter, officers, and ordinances. In the New Covenant God ordained two foundational offices, apostles and prophets, which have ceased. In addition he ordained evangelists, pastors, teachers, ruling elders, and deacons. All of these offices (both foundational and continuing) contribute to the edification of the body of Christ until he returns, to instruct the people of God in the way of salvation, in the duties required in his holy law, and in the gospel witness of the church toward the world.

The church of Christ is one body and Christ is her Head. She is therefore governed according to the biblical model by a parity of elders in various assemblies including local, classical, and general made up of those who teach and those who rule. This common government is an outward and visible expression of the church's organic unity in Christ. The office of bishop or overseer (*Gr. episkopos*) in Scripture is identical with the office of elder (*Gr. presbyteros*). The ecclesiastical power of these assemblies is



only *ministerial* and *declarative*. Their power is not to legislate new rules or regulations, but only as ministers to declare what God has already declared in Holy Scripture, to require what he requires in Scripture, and to bind what he binds in his word. In matters of faith and worship the conscience of the individual Christian is therefore free from all doctrines and commandments of men which have no positive warrant in the Scriptures. Yet when the church of God rules in accordance with Holy Scripture, the Christian is to submit to such a ruling with reverence not only because it is Scriptural but also because of the authority that Christ has given to his church.

Because of the limitations of our human perspective, the church of God in all places and in all ages includes some outward members who are unregenerate at heart. Therefore there is a distinction between the visible and invisible aspects of the church, since no human may see infallibly with his eyes who is born of the Spirit and who is not. There is such a thing as a false profession of faith. The invisible church consists of all those who are truly regenerate of the Spirit. The visible church includes all those throughout the whole world who profess the faith of Christ, and their children.

In its outward form in this life the church is always tainted by sin, and so she is sometimes more, sometimes less pure, according as she applies the rule of the word of God in her proclamation of the gospel, in the administration of the sacraments, and in godly church discipline. Yet she is not to be abandoned where the life of the Spirit is evident in these distinguishing marks. Because God has given the church his word, ordinances, and officers to build up the people of God in faith unto salvation, Christians forsake the visible church only at the peril of their souls. Outside of the visible church there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.

## **XI. The Sacraments**

The Sacraments are signs and seals instituted by Christ himself for his church to be practiced until his return for her edification, so that our weak faith might be strengthened and assured with the use of visible symbols, and to distinguish the church from the world. There are two sacraments in the New Covenant: Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Baptism is a sign and seal from God to Christians of all the benefits of the covenant of grace including regeneration or baptism of the Holy Spirit, sanctification, and engrafting into Christ as members of his body. It is to be applied to believers and to their children as a visible sign to build up their faith in Christ, and as a stamp of God's promise to save all his elect, whom he grants faith to believe in Christ and repent of their sins. Baptism is administered by washing with water in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Baptism affords the entire church an opportunity to reflect on the grace of God given to them in Christ, sealed in their own baptisms. It is not the act of baptism that saves, but the Holy Spirit's saving application of that grace promised in baptism in his own appointed time.

The Lord's supper is a sacrament signifying Christ's death for sinners and sealing all its benefits and communion with his body and blood for believers. The elements of the Lord's Supper are bread and wine. In the Lord's Supper believing communicants feed on Christ's body and blood by faith, not with their mouths. The Lord's Supper is to be received only in faith upon due preparation and self-examination by those who have made a credible profession of faith. Communicants who partake unworthily of the Lord's Supper, not with believing hearts, do not receive Christ's body and blood. They reject the grace that God offers in the sacrament to their own damnation.

## **XII. The Last Things**

The Scriptures teach that the same Jesus who died, rose again, and ascended shall return with glory to judge the living and the dead. He is now reigning as King at the Father's right hand, where he will remain until all his enemies be subdued under his feet. Both evil and good will continue in the world until his return. The characteristic pessimism of those who expect the church to perish (or disappear) from the earth before the end of the form of this present world is not founded in Scripture. Neither do the Scriptures hold out a "golden age" either before or after Christ's return when he will reign for specifically one thousand years. Christ is now reigning as King. Rather, the Scripture properly interpreted teaches that there will be a progressive advance of the kingdom of God on earth, as the Spirit quickens dead sinners along with the proclamation of the gospel by the saints, and that this progressive conquest of the whole world of Christ by his word and Spirit through his people will continue until his return.