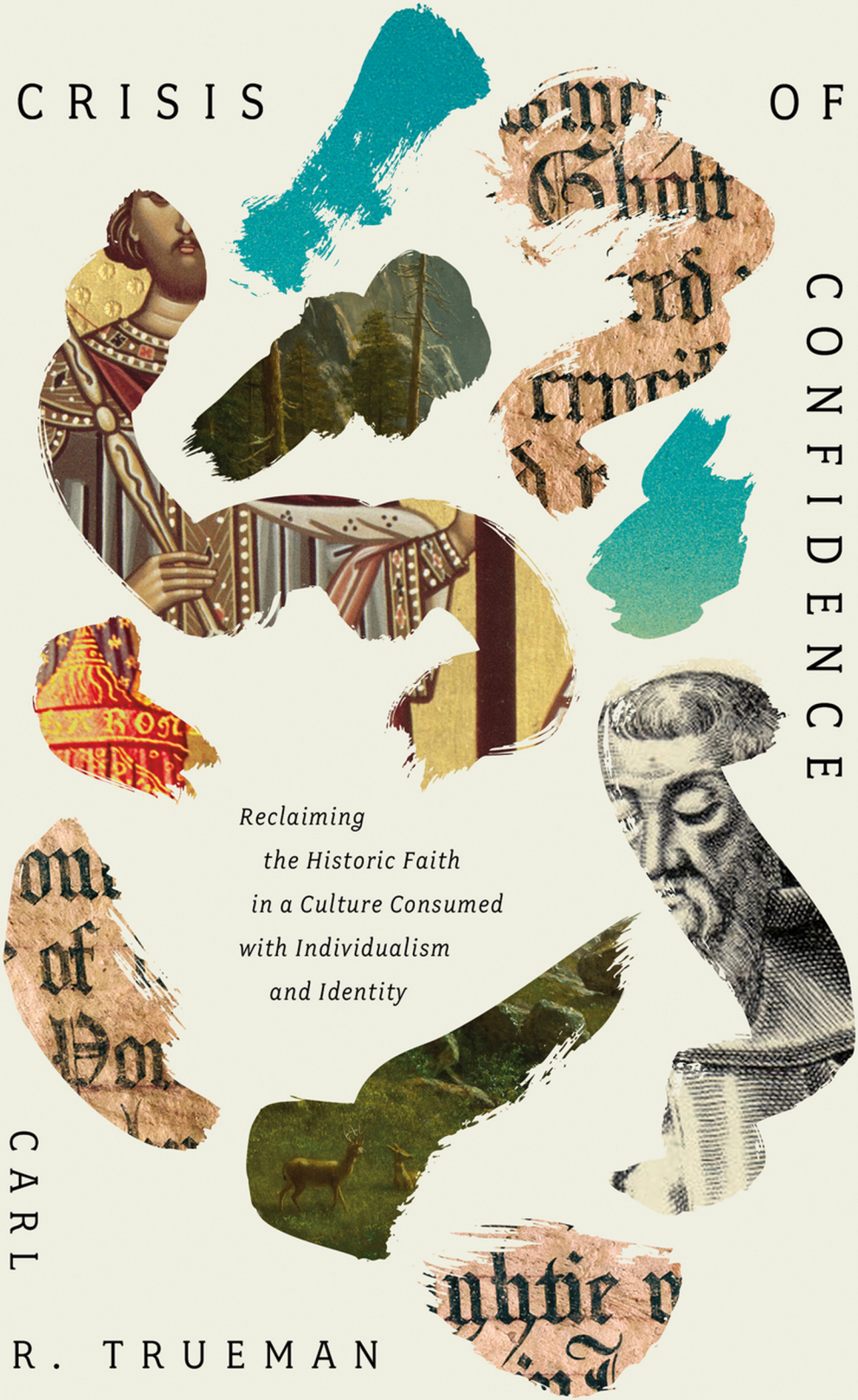# CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE

*Reclaiming
the Historic Faith
in a Culture Consumed
with Individualism
and Identity*

CARL R. TRUEMAN

"Carl Trueman's defense of the creedal imperative is well-known and greatly appreciated. This revised edition gives us greater insight into why the creeds and confessions of the church are so helpful—and at a time when many denominations and churches seem to be adrift. We cannot afford to act as if we are the first to ever consider the great claims of Christian doctrine and discipleship. The creeds of the early church and the confessions of the Reformation are in fact God's good gifts to keep us from idiosyncratic individualism. This book is worth reading, and its argument worth pondering afresh."

Mark D. Thompson, Principal, Moore Theological College

"This little gem crystallizes a message that Carl Trueman has been preaching for many years, and preaching very well: orthodox creeds and confessions are biblical, practical, and crucial to the revitalization of our churches. They are derived from the Bible, they summarize the Bible, and they ought to shape our leaders' interpretations of the Bible. They also ought to shape believers' doing of the word in corporate worship and daily Christian practice. I commend this book heartily to all who love the Lord, submit themselves to his word, and commit themselves to making disciples."

Douglas A. Sweeney, Dean, Professor of Divinity, Beeson Divinity School

"In *Crisis of Confidence*, Carl Trueman returns to his compelling argument for creeds and confessions in light of the contested issues of our strange new world. With clarity and pastoral insight, Trueman shows how historic creeds define us and bind us to the community of faith. They identify not only what we believe but also how we act and worship. Creeds are also peculiar in that we receive them and find our meaning in their confession. Trueman laments that too many today believe inner feelings determine outward identity. For them, authenticity is not received but produced by our deepest desires. Trueman's timely book reminds us how creeds and confessions shape and inform our identity by pointing us always to the God who brings us authenticity by his gospel."

Carl Beckwith, Professor of Historical Theology, Concordia Theological Seminary

"In *Crisis of Confidence*, Carl Trueman makes a fresh case for creeds and confessions. At a time when not only individuals but also churches are unsure of their purpose and identity, Christians have reason to be thankful for this useful update of an important book."

Chad Van Dixhoorn, Professor of Church History and Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

"In this remarkable book, Carl Trueman addresses the crises that plague both church and culture in the light of historic confessional formulations of our faith in the triune God. He offers a prophetic and apostolic call to return to the creedal confession of Christ and the Creator's design for human living, which provides new life and guidance for how to live out the faith in our modern world. This book is a valuable resource for believers as they think through their own lives and the life of Christ's church. It will help them remain faithful to Scripture and our Christian heritage as well as witness to the Lord in the twenty-first century."

Robert Kolb, Professor of Systematic Theology Emeritus, Concordia Seminary

"I know of few people better equipped to write this book. As both a scholar and a pastor, Carl Trueman combines his expertise as a historian with some important biblical observations to make a convincing case. This book will prove to be immensely useful in today's ecclesiastical climate."

Mark Jones, Senior Pastor, Faith Presbyterian Church, Vancouver, British Columbia

"Carl Trueman, again, has given us a stimulating book. He manages to demonstrate the relevance of creeds by showing how fresh the old ones are. This book is not only a must-read for those who stick to creeds without knowing why, or for those whose creed it is to have no creed, but for everyone who tries to practice the Christian faith."

Herman Selderhuis, President, Theological University Apeldoorn, the Netherlands; Director, Refo500; President, Reformation Research Consortium

"Church leaders often dispute the need for confessions of faith on the grounds of the supreme authority of the Bible. In this timely book, Carl Trueman demonstrates effectively how such claims are untenable. We all have creeds—the Bible itself requires them—but some are unwritten, not open to public accountability, and the consequences can be damaging. Trueman's case deserves the widest possible hearing."

Robert Letham, Senior Research Fellow, Union School of Theology

"Carl Trueman's case for what he terms 'the creedal imperative' of the Christian faith is spot-on. Trueman not only identifies but also deftly rebuts a number of traditional as well as more-recent objections in contemporary culture to creeds and confessions. On the one hand, he shows the untenability of the 'no creed but Christ, no book but the Bible' position of many evangelical Christians. And on the other hand, he defends the use of creeds and confessions that summarize and defend the teaching of Scripture without supplementing Scripture or diminishing its authority."

Cornelis P. Venema, President and Professor of Doctrinal Studies, Mid-America Reformed Seminary; author, *Christ and Covenant Theology* and *Chosen in Christ*

Crisis of Confidence

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Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution

Crisis of Confidence

*Reclaiming the Historic Faith in a Culture
Consumed with Individualism and Identity*

Carl R. Trueman

To Peter, John, Lauren, and Emily

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Acknowledgments

Old Creeds versus the New Creed

WHEN I WROTE *The Creedal Imperative* in 2012, I was motivated by the conviction that churches need statements of faith that do more than specify ten or twelve basic points of doctrine. They need confessions that seek to present in concise form the salient points of the whole counsel of God. And I was convinced that the section of the church most cautious about creeds and confessions—Protestant evangelicalism—could actually best protect what it valued most (the supreme authority of Scripture) by, perhaps counterintuitively, embracing the very principles of confessionalism about which it was so cautious.

In the decade since *The Creedal Imperative* was published, my convictions on both points have not changed. If anything, they have become stronger. What has changed is the wider context in which the church now finds herself. On the positive side, orthodox Protestantism has rediscovered the classical theism of the ancient creeds and the consensus of the Reformation confessions. Scholarship in the last thirty years has deepened its understanding of both Nicene Christianity and the relationship between patristic, medieval, Reformation, and post-Reformation theology. The result is that we now have a far more profound and accurate understanding of the history of Christian orthodoxy than the rather tendentious and simplistic pieties about the relationship of Protestantism to broader theological currents that earlier generations took for granted. Now we have a much better grasp, for example, of what exactly the Westminster Confession means when it claims that

God is "a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions."[1] For this we can be truly grateful.

On the negative side, however, the last few years have seen fundamental changes in Western culture that have both transformed the relationship between wider society and the church and placed the church under serious pressure on points that were only just starting to emerge in 2012. Our disagreements with the wider world today are not simply the traditional ones of whether Christianity's supernatural claims about miracles, the incarnation, and the resurrection are true. The mainstream acceptance of gay marriage and gender ideology witnesses to an emerging world that finds not only Christian theology implausible but Christian anthropology and ethics offensive and even dangerous. And after centuries when the broad moral assumptions of the world and of the church enjoyed huge common ground, we now live in a time when these are frequently in direct opposition to each other. We can no longer assume that the world will cultivate in our children a moral vision broadly compatible with that of Christianity.

Christianity involves a *creed*, a *code*, and a *cult*. The creed sets out the beliefs of the church—beliefs about God, creation, human beings, sin, redemption, and consummation. It describes reality. The code presents the moral vision for life here on earth. God's people are meant to reflect God's character. That was clear for Old Testament Israel and remains true in the New Testament. It is why Paul, for all his glorious emphasis on the objective work of salvation in Christ, sees that work as having clear practical implications for believers. And the cult is the way in which Christians are to worship the God described in the creed and whose character is reflected in the code. The three are all intimately connected, all grounded in the reality of God, and all nonnegotiable. No church, and no Christian, merely has a creed or a code or a cult. All three are inseparable facets of the one Christian faith.

In *The Creedal Imperative*, my focus was on the creed and, to some extent, the cult aspects of this triplet. In the years since, the code has become far more urgent as a topic for discussion. And, as with the creed and the cult, classic formal creeds and confessions are excellent resources for addressing this matter.

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1   Westminster Confession of Faith (hereafter cited as WCF) 2.1, in *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms: A Reader's Edition*, ed. Chad Van Dixhoorn (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 188 (hereafter cited as *CCC*).

As I have argued elsewhere, at the heart of the issues we face today is the phenomenon of *expressive individualism*. This is the modern creed whose mantras and liturgies set the terms for how we think about ourselves and our world today. It is the notion that every person is constituted by a set of inward feelings, desires, and emotions. The real "me" is that person who dwells inside my body, and thus I am most truly myself when I am able to act outwardly in accordance with those inner feelings. In an extreme form we see this in the transgender phenomenon, where physical, biological sex and psychological gender identity can stand in opposition to each other. I can therefore really be a woman if I think I am one, even if my body is that of a male. But expressive individualism is not restricted to questions of gender. When people identify themselves by their desires—sexual or otherwise—they are expressive individuals. And to some extent that implicates us all. The modern self is the expressive individual self.

In the world where expressive individualism is normative, creeds and confessions become even more problematic for the wider culture and even more important and useful for Christians. First, in a world increasingly inclined to radical subjectivism, creeds and confessions represent a clear assertion of objective reality. In *The Creedal Imperative*, I made the point that this relativizes our time and place in history. In subscribing to a confession and in reciting a creed in corporate worship, we acknowledge that our age does not have all the answers and that we as churches stand upon foundations laid down by our ancestors in the faith. That is important in promoting humility, in reminding us that we are merely the latest stewards in a line of witnesses charged with passing on the apostolic faith to the next generation. But it is now clear to me that these acts also thereby relativize who we each are as individuals. Creeds and confessions remind us that we are not the center of the universe; nor are we those who decide what the meaning of our own lives is to be. We are embedded in a greater, given reality that is decisive in determining who we are and how we should understand ourselves. To declare "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, / Maker of heaven and earth" is to declare that we are not the center of the universe, that I must be understood in terms of a larger, objective reality.[2] Immediately as I recite this with the congregation, I am

2   Nicene Creed (*CCC* 17).

asserting, confessing, and reminding myself that I am not autonomous but am a mere part of creation. My identity is thus in a very deep sense not something I construct, choose, or feel. It is a given over which I have no say or control, just as the identity of my biological parents is something that is simply a reality and not a matter of my will or decision. Perhaps nothing is more important than this realization: on it hangs biblical anthropology, biblical ethics, and biblical worship—creed, code, cult.

Second, creeds and confessions do not negate that which is true about expressive individualism but rather, when used correctly, answer the deepest legitimate concerns of the same. Expressive individualism is correct in seeing our inner lives, our feelings and emotions, as important to who we are. Where it errs is in two specific ways: it grants an overwhelming authority to those feelings, and it sees the subsequent outward expression of those feelings as that which makes us "authentic."

Creeds and confessions speak to both the legitimate concerns and the erroneous excesses. Take the Heidelberg Catechism, for example. It uses the first person singular throughout and is framed by a first question that speaks of hope and assurance grounded in God's action in Christ and a last question that indicates that God's commitment to us is even greater than our desire for the things for which we pray. In both cases, human feelings are not repudiated or dismissed as of no significance. Rather they are set within the context of a broader understanding of God. In other words, the believer's feelings are shaped by the theology summarized in the Catechism.

This also connects to the area where expressive individualism is creating most havoc today: moral and social codes. Emotions do play a part in what it means to be a moral person. If I see someone being physically attacked on the street and feel no outrage, then it would be fair to say that there is something morally problematic about me. Yet feelings cannot be the sole guide to morality. I might feel terribly sad, even guilty, that I cannot affirm a friend who comes out as gay, but that does not mean my feelings in this matter are a reliable guide to the intrinsic morality of the situation. My feelings need to be informed by the great moral structure of the world; and even if I never rid myself of all such sadness and guilt, my feelings still need to be subordinated to that moral structure. Confessions point me to that structure and summarize it for me. They offer a helpful rule by which to judge my own emotional instincts, and a view of reality to which, over

time, I learn to conform such instinct. That is, of course, where code and cult connect: praise and worship, precisely because they appeal to both the mind and the heart, are critical here; and as worship is shaped by creeds and confessions, so creedal and confessional theology even forms my emotions. And that is where the concern for authenticity comes in: I am authentic not as I give free rein to autonomous feelings and emotions; I am authentic as I bring my inner feelings into conformity with outward reality and can thus give expression to them in a legitimate and edifying way. This is what the psalms do: they give legitimate expression to our feelings in corporate worship, combining words, meter, and music in a way that involves the whole human person while ultimately thereby channeling those feelings in ways that reflect God's truth. Our creedal worship should do the same.

The church in the West, particularly in the US, is waking up to a strange new world. Its assumptions about its place in that world—for example, that its theology would be regarded as inherently implausible but its morality would continue to be broadly compatible with that of society as a whole—have been shown to be incorrect. That this revelation has come so suddenly tempts us all to panic or despair. This is why creeds and confessions are even more important now than before: they anchor us in history; they offer us reasonably comprehensive frameworks for thinking about the connections between God, anthropology, and ethics; and above all they point us to the transcendent God who rules over all things. In short, they remind us that God will bring all things to a conclusion in which the marriage of the Lamb will take place, and they help us know how to think, live, and worship in the interim. The creedal imperative is greater today than it was ten years ago because the God to which the creeds and confessions point remains the same even in these times of change and flux, and we need perhaps more than ever to be reminded of that fact and its implications.

Introduction

A COLLEAGUE OF MINE loves to tell the following story about a church he used to visit. The pastor there had a habit of standing in the pulpit, seizing his Bible in his right hand, raising it above his head, and pointing to it with his left. "This," he declared in a booming voice, "is our only creed and our only confession." Ironically, the church was marked by teaching that included the five points of Calvinism, dispensationalism, and a form of polity that reflected in broad terms its origins as a Plymouth Brethren assembly. In other words, while its only creed was the Bible, it actually connected, in terms of the details of its life and teaching, to almost no other congregation in the history of the church. Clearly, the church did have a creed, a summary view of what the Bible taught on grace, eschatology, and ecclesiology; it was just that nobody ever wrote it down and set it out in public. That is a serious problem. As I argue in subsequent pages, it is actually unbiblical; and that is ironic and somewhat sad, given the (no doubt) sincere desire of the pastor and the people of this church to have an approach to church life that guaranteed the unique status of the Bible.

The burden that motivates my writing of this book is my belief that creeds and confessions are vital to the present and future well-being of the church. Such a statement may well jar evangelical ears that are used to the notion that Scripture alone is to be considered the sole, supreme authority for Christian faith and practice. Does my claim not strike at the very heart of the notion of Scripture alone? Does it not place me in jeopardy of regarding both Scripture and something outside Scripture, some tradition, as being of coordinate and potentially equal authority? And is there not a danger that commitment to time-bound creeds and confessions might well doom the church to irrelevance in the modern world?

These are, indeed, legitimate concerns, and I address these, and more, in the coming pages. Here, however, I want to place my own cards on the table. Every author writes from a particular perspective, with arguments shaped to some extent by personal commitments, background, and belief. Thus, it seems entirely appropriate to allow the reader insight into my own context and predispositions in order to be better prepared to understand what I am going to say.

I am a professor at a Christian liberal arts college, but I am also a minister in a confessional Presbyterian denomination, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. In other words, I am a confessional Presbyterian. This term is extremely important for locating me on the spectrum of Christian churches and commitments.

To take the latter term first, *Presbyterian* means that I am committed to a Presbyterian form of church government, whereby the church is ruled at a congregational level by a session, or committee, of elders; at a regional level by a presbytery of ministers and elders drawn from the churches in the area; and at a national level by a General Assembly of ministers and elders drawn from all parts of the country. When I became a minister in my denomination, I took vows to uphold this form of government both in what I teach and in the respect I give to the various courts of the church. I am accountable to these church courts for what I teach and how I live.

More significant for this book is the adjective *confessional*. This means that I am committed to the idea that the Presbyterian confessional position, as stated in the Westminster Standards, represents a summary of the teaching of the Bible on key points such as who God is, who Christ is, what justification means, and so on. When I became a minister, I took a solemn vow to that effect. This points to another aspect of being confessional: my vows connect to a structure of church government such that, if I am found to be teaching something inconsistent with what I am pledged to uphold, I can be held to account. If necessary, in the worst situations, I can even be removed from public office in the church.

Notice, I said above that my vow reflects the fact that I believe the statements in the Westminster Standards are *a summary of Scripture's teaching*, not that I believe the Westminster Standards represent teaching supplemental to Scripture, or independent of it. Rather, they summarize what is already there in Scripture itself.

Now, this position is not without its problems. How, one might ask, do I avoid making the Standards a kind of *a priori* framework into which Scripture is made to fit? In other words, is there not a danger here of the tail wagging the dog, of treating the summary as the grid by which I read Scripture? I address this and similar questions later. At this point, my purpose is simply to let readers know the position that I occupy so they can understand the perspective from which this book is being written. In sum, I not only believe that creeds and confessions are good for the church but also am committed by vow to uphold the teaching of a particular confession. This indicates that the status of creeds and confessions is not for me simply a matter of intellectual interest; I am committed to the notion at a deep, personal level.

The fact that I am a confessional Christian places me at odds with the vast majority of evangelical Christians today. That is ironic, because most Christian churches throughout the ages have defined themselves by commitment to some form of creed, confession, or doctrinal statement. This is the case for the Eastern Orthodox, for Roman Catholics, and for Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican Protestants. Some streams of Baptists also have confessions; and many independent churches today that may not think of themselves as confessional have brief statements of faith that define who they are and what they believe. Furthermore, as I argue later, even those churches and Christians who repudiate the whole notion of creeds and confessions will yet tend to operate with an implicit creed.

Despite this, it is true to say that we live in an anticonfessional age, at least in intention if not always in practice. The most blatant examples of this come from those who argue that the Protestant notion of Scripture alone simply requires the rejection of creeds and confessions. Scripture is the sole authority; of what use therefore are further documents? And how can one ever claim such documents have authority without thus derogating from the authority of Scripture? These arguments have a certain specious force, but I argue in chapters 1 and 2 that while the reasons for anticonfessionalism are manifold, many of them are driven more by cultural forces of which too many are unaware. Awareness of these forces, by contrast, may not automatically free us from their influence but can at least offer us the opportunity of subjecting them to critique.

I do want to make the point here that Christians are not divided between those who have creeds and confessions and those who do not; rather, they are divided between those who have public creeds and confessions that are written down and exist as public documents, subject to public scrutiny, evaluation, and critique, and those who have private creeds and confessions that are often improvised, unwritten, and thus not open to public scrutiny, not susceptible to evaluation, and, crucially and ironically, not therefore subject to testing by Scripture to see whether they are true.

Anticonfessionalism among evangelicals is actually closely related to their putative rejection of tradition. For many, the principle of Scripture alone stands against any notion that the church's tradition plays any constructive role in her life or thought. Some regard this as one of the principal insights of the Protestant Reformers: Rome had (and has) tradition; Protestantism has Scripture. The sixteenth-century Reformation was thus a struggle over authority, with church tradition being pitted against the supremacy of Scripture; and modern evangelicals stand in lockstep with their Protestant forebears on this matter.

A few moments of reflection, however, indicate how misleading and, in fact, untrue is the claim that Protestants have the Bible rather than tradition. Most evangelicals, for example, will typically use Bible translations, and such translations—be they the New International Version (NIV), Revised Standard Version (RSV), English Standard Version (ESV), or King James Version (KJV)—stand within established traditions of Bible translation, linguistics, lexicography, and so forth. Further, beneath these translations lie the original Hebrew and Greek texts; so traditions of textual understanding also underlie these translations and, even for those linguistic geniuses who are more comfortable with just the Hebrew and Greek, these various traditions will shape the choice of text, the way the languages were learned, and the kind of choices made on matters of obscure grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. Thus, "Scripture alone," whatever else it means, cannot mean Scripture approached in a vacuum.

And we can take this reflection on tradition a step further. All Protestant pastors, even the most fundamentalist, will, if they are remotely competent, prepare their sermons with the help of lexicons, commentaries, and books of theology. As soon as they take down one of these books from their bookcases and start to read it, of course, they are drawing positively on

church tradition. They are not simply reading the word of God; they are reading the thoughts and reflections on that word offered by someone else and articulated using words, sentences, and paragraphs that are not found anywhere in the Bible. Indeed, as soon as one uses the word *Trinity* from the pulpit, one is drawing on tradition, not Scripture.

In fact, *tradition* is not the issue; it is how one defines that tradition and how one understands the way it connects to Scripture that are really the points at issue. Indeed, this was the crux of the Reformation, which was not so much a struggle between Scripture and tradition as between different types of traditions. In a famous exchange between a leading light of the Catholic Reformation, Cardinal Sadoleto, and the Reformer John Calvin, Sadoleto argued that the Protestants had abandoned the church tradition. Calvin responded that, on the contrary, the Protestants had the true tradition; it was the Catholic Church that had moved away from the truth. The point was simple and well-made: the tradition that transmitted the correct understanding of Scripture from generation to generation belonged to the Protestants.

Here is not the place to debate the veracity of Calvin's claim regarding the content of tradition; suffice it to note that he understood the Reformation not as Scripture versus tradition but as scriptural tradition versus unscriptural tradition. Thoughtful Protestants then, and ever since, have understood the Reformers as arguing for what we might call a tradition that is *normed* by Scripture. In other words, Protestants know that they use language and conceptual terminology not found explicitly in the Bible; but they understand that such articulations are useful in understanding what Scripture says and that at the point where they are found to be inadequate for this task, or even to contradict Scripture, there they must be modified or abandoned.

The same is true of the creeds and confessions of the church, which are, one might say, the most concentrated deposits of tradition, as affirmed by the church. These documents are often referred to as *normed norms* or, to use the Latin, *norma normata*, in contrast to Scripture which is the *norming norm*, or *norma normans*. What that means is that the creeds and confessions represent a public statement of what a particular church or denomination believes that Scripture teaches in a synthetic form. By *synthetic*, I do not mean "false," as in, say, a synthetic fiber like nylon, which is designed to look like cotton but is not really cotton. I mean rather a presentation

that is not simply a collection of Bible verses but a thematic summary of what the Bible teaches. Thus, in the Nicene Creed, we have an explication of the identity of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which is considered to represent what the Bible as a whole teaches on this subject. The important point to note is that such statements are public, and thus open to public scrutiny in the light of what Scripture teaches. Thus, they can be accepted or rejected, modified or clarified, as and when they are found to be wanting; the context and means for such change I discuss elsewhere. Here, I simply want the reader to note the synthetic and public nature of the documents.

This book consists of six chapters. In chapter 1, I look at some of the powerful currents within modern culture that serve to make the whole idea of creeds and confessions somewhat implausible. I do not intend to reduce evangelical objections to mere religious expressions of such secular forces, but I believe that an understanding of such forces can be of great help in clarifying why the case for confessionalism can be difficult to make at the present time.

In chapter 2, I look at the biblical teaching on a number of related points (the importance of language; the reality and unity of human nature; Paul's emphasis on doctrine, on eldership, on a "form of sound words," on human identity and mutual dependency, and on tradition). My conclusion is not only that creeds and confessions are plausible, given biblical teaching, but that Paul actually seems to assume that something like them will be a normal part of the postapostolic church's life. In other words, there is a sense in which the claim to have no creed but the Bible is incoherent, given the fact that the Bible itself seems to teach the need for creeds. I also argue that creeds and confessions embody another point that is crucial to Paul: Christians belong together, and a significant part of that belonging is our common commitment to common beliefs that define who we are as a people, not as individuals.

In chapter 3, I outline the ecclesiological developments of relevance to the case for creeds and confessions. In particular, I focus on the Trinitarian and Christological discussions between the Council of Nicaea in 325 and the Council of Chalcedon in 451. I also touch on the Apostles' and the Athanasian creeds. Two important lessons I draw from this study relate to doctrinal complexity and the importance of the church. As to the former, history teaches that many Christian doctrines can exist only in a stable

form within a relatively complex network of related doctrines. Christian theology, in other words, always has a certain ineradicable complexity, which has serious implications for the modern evangelical predilection for simple and very brief statements of faith. As to ecclesiology, it is clear from the early church that terms such as *heresy* have a meaningful content only when connected to a church that has a specific confession.

In chapter 4, I deal with major Protestant confessional standards: the Anglican Articles and Homilies; the Lutheran Book of Concord; the Three Forms of Unity; the Westminster Standards; and the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith. This chapter is of necessity highly selective. Protestantism has produced a vast amount of confessional material, and so I have chosen to focus on those with which I am most familiar. In choosing these, I do not intend to imply that Arminians, General Baptists, Anabaptists, and others do not have confessions and cannot be confessional. I hope that anyone from these traditions who reads this book will see that the principles of confessionalism are not confined simply to those confessions I happen to have mentioned.

In chapter 5, in order to do justice to the doxological origins of Christian creeds and to underline the important function that such have played, and can continue to play, in the life of the church, I focus on creeds and praise. Too often we think of these documents in a negative sense, as if their sole purpose was simply to keep people out of the church and to offer a dry-as-dust account of the Christian faith. By contrast, creeds are central to Christian doxology. Further, building on my earlier argument, I argue that creeds and confessions inform the worship of Christians in a way that binds us all together: worship is not about self-expression; it is about giving corporate expression to God and his reality.

In chapter 6, I make the case for the usefulness of confessions by highlighting a number of advantages to having them, from limitation of church power to a proper pedagogical structure for church life. After the conclusion, I also include an appendix addressing the vexing question of the possibility and practicality of confessional revision.

In writing this book, I come to my subject as one convinced that confessional Christianity captures a very important aspect of biblical teaching on the church. I was a nonconfessional evangelical for many years; discovering confessional Presbyterianism in my early thirties was a liberating

experience. Nevertheless, I am aware that there can be a rather distasteful, not to mention sinful, tendency among many confessional writers to look down with scorn and derision on those who are not confessional. I trust that I have not written in that spirit; rather, I hope that this book will go some way to persuading nonconfessional Christians who love the Bible and seek to follow Christ that confessionalism, far from being something to fear, can actually help them better protect that which is so dear to them.

The astute reader should now be able to see the case I make in this book: I argue that creeds and confessions are thoroughly consistent with the belief that Scripture alone is the unique source of revelation and authority. Indeed, I go somewhat further: I argue that creeds and confessions are, in fact, necessary for the well-being of the church, and that churches that claim not to have them place themselves at a permanent disadvantage when it comes to holding fast to that form of sound words that was so precious to the aging Paul as he advised his young protégé, Timothy. Indeed, while such churches are often motivated by the highest of intentions—safeguarding the authority of Scripture—this can be done best by having creeds and confessions. Linked to this latter point, I make the case that it is at least arguable, based on Scripture, that the need for creeds and confessions is not just a practical imperative for the church but also a biblical imperative.

1

The Cultural Case against
Creeds and Confessions

IN THE INTRODUCTION, I briefly mentioned the standard, knee-jerk reaction against creeds and confessions, often found in evangelical circles, that such documents supplant the unique place of the Bible, place tradition on an equal—or even superior—footing with Scripture, and thus compromise a truly evangelical, Protestant notion of authority. While I offer a more thorough response to this line of objection later, I did note that all Christians engage in confessional synthesis; the difference is simply whether one adheres to a public confession, subject to public scrutiny, or to a private confession that is, by its very nature, immune to such examination.

Before proceeding to a more thoroughgoing exposition of the use and the usefulness of confessions, however, it is worth spending some time reflecting on other reasons why creeds and confessions are regarded with such suspicion these days. While the objection to them is often couched in language that appears to be jealous for biblical authority, there are also powerful forces at work within our modern world that militate against adherence to historic statements of the Christian faith. As the goldfish swimming in the bowl is unaware of the temperature and taste of the water in which he swims, so often the most powerfully formative forces of our societies and cultures are those with which we are so familiar as to be functionally unaware of how they shape our thinking, even our thinking about what exactly it means to say that Scripture has supreme and unique authority. It would be a tragic irony if the rejection of creeds and confessions

by so many of those who sincerely wish to be biblically faithful turned out to be not an act of faithfulness but rather an unwitting capitulation to the spirit of the age. It is some of the forces that shape this spirit that I address in this chapter.

Four Assumptions

My conviction that creeds and confessions are a good and necessary part of healthy, biblical church life rests on a host of different arguments and convictions; but, at root, there are four basic presuppositions to which I hold that must be true for the case for confessions to be a sound one. These are as follows:

   1. *Human beings are not free, autonomous creatures defined by feelings but creatures made in the image of God and always defined by external relationships to God and each other.* We as human beings do not exist in isolation; nor do we exist in a world that is mere "stuff," a kind of cosmic playdough of no intrinsic significance that we can simply make mean anything we wish. Our identity is determined by the fact we are made in God's image and placed from birth in a network of relationships that have a binding authority on us and determine who we are. In short, our identity at base is not something we invent for ourselves; it is something we learn as we learn about the objective nature of the world in which we live.

   2. *The past is important and has things of positive relevance to teach us.* Creeds and confessions are, almost by definition, documents that were composed at some point in the past; and, in most cases, we are talking about the distant past, not last week or last year. Thus, to claim that creeds and confessions still fulfill positive functions, in terms of transmitting truth from one generation to another or making it clear to the outside world what it is that particular churches believe, requires that we believe the past can still speak to us today. Thus, any cultural force that weakens or attenuates the belief that the past can be a source of knowledge and even wisdom is also a force that serves to undermine the relevance of creeds and confessions.

   3. *Language must be an appropriate vehicle for the stable transmission of truth across time and geographical space.* Creeds and confessions are documents that make theological truth claims. That is not to say that is *all* they do: the role, for example, of the Apostles' and the Nicene creeds in many church liturgies indicates that they can also fulfill doxological as well as

pedagogical and theological roles; but while they can thus be more than theological, doctrinal statements that rest upon and express truth claims about God and the world he has created, they can never be less. They do this, of course, in words; and so, if these claims are to be what they claim to be—statements about a reality beyond language—then language itself must be an adequate medium for performing this task. Thus, any force that undermines general confidence in language as a medium capable of conveying information or of constituting relationships is also a force that strikes at the validity of creeds and confessions.

4. There must be a body or an institution that can authoritatively compose and enforce creeds and confessions. This body or institution is the church. I address the significance of this in more detail in subsequent chapters, but it is important to understand at the outset that confessions are not private documents. They are significant because they have been adopted by the church as public declarations of her faith, and their function cannot be isolated from their ecclesiastical nature and context. This whole concept assumes that institutions and institutional authority structures are not necessarily bad or evil or defective simply by their very existence as institutions. Thus, any cultural force that overthrows or undermines notions of external or institutional authority effectively removes the mechanisms by which creeds and confessions can function as anything other than simple summaries of doctrine for private edification.

If these are the presuppositions of confessionalism, then it is clear that we have a major problem, because each of these four basic presuppositions represents a profoundly countercultural position, something that stands opposed to the general flow of modern life. Today, Western culture is dominated by expressive individualism, the idea that we are defined by our inner feelings, that our relationships with others place no natural or necessary obligations upon us, and that we can pick and choose them as they serve our emotional needs. This idea plays into the general cultural assertion of individual autonomy and rejection of external authority—or at least of traditional external authority—that requires some sacrifice of ourselves for others. Whether it is the child rebelling against the parent or the individual rebelling against the sex of his or her own body, today autonomy and personal desire are king; and these press against anything from outside that

tells us who we are, what we should believe, or how we should live. Next, the past is more often a source of embarrassment than a positive source of knowledge; and when it is considered useful, it is usually as providing examples of what not to do or of defective, less-advanced thinking than of truth for the present.

Third, language is similarly suspect: in a world of spin, dishonest politicians, and ruthless marketing, language can often seem to be—indeed, often is—manipulative, deceptive, or downright wicked but rarely transparent and worthy of taking at face value. Finally, institutions—from multinational corporations to governments—seem to be in the game of self-perpetuation, bullying, and control for the sake of control. They are rarely seen as entities that exist in practice for the real benefit of others. As noted, above, in a world where expressive individualism rules the cultural roost, this tendency is only intensified. Thus, the big four presuppositions of confessionalism fly in the face of the values of contemporary culture, and confessionalists clearly have their work cut out to mount a counterattack. And such a counterattack begins with the simple truism of every successful campaigner, from wartime leaders to the coaches of high school track teams: know your enemy. In this context, knowing the enemy may also help us realize how, in our defense of the unique authority of Scripture, our understanding of what that means is sometimes shaped more by the hidden forces of the world around us than by the teaching of Scripture and the historic life and practice of the church.

Expressive Individualism

Various trajectories of modern culture have served to make expressive individualism normative in Western society. With the advent of the Reformation, the authority of the church as a solid and stable institution that gave religious identity to all came to an end. Religion slowly but surely became a matter of personal choice, and as it did so, the authority of personal choice became greater even as that of the church as institution declined. With this development came an increasing emphasis on inner psychology as offering the foundation for personal knowledge. René Descartes, whose philosophy of knowledge and certainty is typically summarized as "I think, therefore I am," offered perhaps the most famous expression of this, but this move inward was not the monopoly of scientific philosophers seeking epistemo-

logical certainty.[1] With Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Schiller, and then the Romantics, more and more emphasis was placed on the importance of feelings and emotions as being critical to personal identity. And with them too came a rebellion against granting external institutions the kind of authority they had once enjoyed. We might put it somewhat simplistically, though not misleadingly, as follows: the idea that it is society, with its traditions and institutions, that messes people up became a deep-seated belief of the modern world.

To this intellectual trajectory we can add the impact of technology. This will also feature in the devaluation of the past discussed below, but it is worth noting here that technology feeds the sense of autonomy that lies at the heart of expressive individualism. Technology instills us with a sense of power and makes us feel that the world is not something to which we have to conform ourselves but rather something that we can overcome or bend to our will. The most obvious examples come from biology. Diseases that were once death sentences can now be cured with a simple course of antibiotics. Sexual promiscuity once carried unavoidable risks of sexually transmitted diseases or unwanted pregnancies. Medical developments have significantly mitigated those risks and allowed us to imagine that we are sovereign and autonomous in the sexual realm. And it is not just biology: cheap transportation has reduced the significance of geographical distance, as has the advent of technologies such as Zoom and Skype. Each of these feeds the idea that we as individuals are in control of the world. Nature lacks the authority it once possessed.

What is significant about expressive individualism for this book is what it does to the notion of institutional authority. In short, it dramatically weakens it. If the purpose of life is individuals being whoever they want to be, or whoever they think they should be, then institutions change from being places of formation to places of performance. They are no longer places of external authority but rather vendors of particular visions of what it means to be me, and I can choose whichever one suits my inner feelings and makes me feel happiest. I have no obligation to the institution, or to anybody else, that does not help in my own program of self-realization.

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1   See René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, trans. Valentine Rodger Miller and Reese P. Miller (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1982), 5.

And that renders thoroughly implausible the idea of the church as the place where I am told who I am, who God is, what I am to believe, and how I am to worship and live in light of that.

Devaluing the Past

Science

Numerous forces in modern culture serve to erode any notion that the past might be a useful source of wisdom. Perhaps the most obvious is the dominance of science. I am not, of course, referring to the content of science. Science undergirds almost all that makes life bearable, from electric lightbulbs to cancer treatment. To say science is the enemy is not, in this instance, to be antiscience. Rather, I am thinking of the kind of cultural mindset that science helps cultivate and reinforce.

Science, by its very nature, assumes that the present is better than the past and that the future will be better than the present. Again, this is not in itself bad. It is surely part of what drives the laudable curiosity that motivates scientists and leads to major breakthroughs; and there is much evidence that this—the fact that the present is better than the past—is, indeed, the case. As one who teaches history, I am often asked by students in which period of history I would most have enjoyed living. My answer is simple and straightforward: this one, the here and now. Call me a weakling if you like, but I would much rather live in an era with analgesics, antibiotics, and flush toilets than in earlier periods where painkillers were unknown, medicine usually involved swallowing some kill-or-cure snake oil made by a wrinkled old crone with dubious personal hygiene, and the "facilities" were little more than a hole in the ground on the edge of the village. By and large, in areas where it is relevant, science has made the world a better place. The evidence is not all one way, however: the Holocaust, for example, is one instance in which science was clearly used to destroy rather than enhance life, and that on a huge scale. But, by and large, science has brought with it huge gains, from medicine to dishwashers.

The problem is that science also comes loaded with a certain philosophical bias, and that is, as stated above, that the past is inferior to the present. It has a built-in narrative of progress, whereby everything—or at least almost everything—just keeps getting better; and the problem is that this

tends to inculcate a broader cultural attitude that applies the same kind of expectation in other areas. Throw concepts like evolution into the mix, and you have a gravitational pull in the culture toward the future, built on the assumed inferiority of the past.

This narrative of scientific progress instills a belief not simply in the superiority of the present in relation to the past but also in the present's uniqueness. This time in which we live has so much more knowledge, displays so much more sophistication, and is so much more complicated than the past. Thus, the past is consequently of no real use in addressing the problems or issues of the present; so great is the difference between them. One would not, for example, use a horse and cart to transport fuel from an oil refinery to a petrol station. Nor would one today consult a seventeenth-century textbook on surgery to find out how to remove a burst appendix. So why would one turn to a creed written in the fourth century or some confession in the seventeenth century to find a summary guide to what Christians today should believe?

Some years ago, I was exposed to precisely this attitude while teaching a class on the ancient church. At some point, I mentioned that a certain professor from another institution was going to be visiting campus to deliver some lectures on the Westminster Standards—that is, the Confession and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. A student immediately asked why she should bother attending these because "some documents written in the seventeenth century seem to have very little to do with" her ministry. I asked her if she had read these apparently irrelevant documents recently. She said she had not. I then pointed out to her that these documents had been regarded by many people as vital and vibrant expressions of the Christian faith since their composition. Given this, and their connection to historic traditions and trajectories of church life and Christian thought, I suggested with every ounce of tact and gentleness I could muster that she might perhaps better ask herself not so much what relevance they have to her ministry but what relevance her ministry had to the church. Her assumption was simple: the past could not really speak in any meaningful way to the present. She was truly a child of the scientific age.

Technology

Closely related to the role of science in cultivating an attitude that downgrades the importance of the past is that of technology. A simple example

should make this point clear. My mother lives in an old weaver's cottage in the Cotswolds. There is a stone fireplace in what is now her living room, and in that fireplace are a series of small holes, roughly an inch in diameter, now plugged with wood, which indicate where the weaver would have had his loom. It is easy to imagine a scene in the early nineteenth century in which the weaver was hard at work making cloth when one of his children wandered into the room and inquired as to what exactly he was doing. No doubt, the weaver would have sat the child down and explained how the loom operated, how the shuttle carried the woolen thread from one side to the other and slowly but surely formed a sheet of fabric. The flow of knowledge from the older generation to the younger was clear; this was no doubt repeated many times in preindustrial societies around the world, where children typically grew up to follow in the footsteps of their parents and were thus more or less apprenticed to their parents from an early age.

Now, jump forward nearly two hundred years to a scene in the same room. I am sitting there, trying to set up my mother's DVR to record a rugby match between Gloucester and Leicester, but, try as I might, I cannot get the machine to do what I want it to do. In walks my niece and asks what I am trying to do. After I explain to her what is going on, she sighs, rolls her eyes, picks up the remote control, and with what seems to me to be two touches of the buttons, has the machine set up to record the match. With a shake of her head, she walks back into the kitchen.

Notice what has happened here, and what the significance of these two encounters is: the flow of knowledge has been reversed. No longer is the younger dependent upon the older; rather, the older is dependent upon the younger. Technology, because it is constantly and rapidly changing, inevitably favors those who have been brought up with it, and who have the kind of young, agile minds that develop new skills quickly and easily. You cannot easily teach a middle-aged historian, any more than an old dog, new tricks; and that means that technology will always favor the young.

This is just one anecdote, and, as my colleagues will tell you, I am among the more—ahem—technologically challenged men of my generation; but the general point is a good one. The technological world, particularly given the rapidity with which it is constantly changing, creates an environment where the assumption is that older people are going to be dependent on the younger. Taken by itself, perhaps, this might not be so significant; but combined with

the impact of science as a whole on cultural attitudes, it undoubtedly plays its role in the bias against age, and thus against the past, which is a hallmark of the modern world and is not incidental in the general antipathy among Christians for creeds and confessions.

Consumerism

A third cultural force that militates against respect for the past is consumerism. As with science, there is much that could be said here, but I have restricted myself to the most salient aspects of the phenomenon.

Consumerism can be defined as an overattachment to material goods and possessions, such that one's meaning or worth is determined by them. This definition is reasonably helpful but misses one key aspect of the phenomenon: it is not just the attachment to material things but also the need for constant acquisition of the same. Life is enriched not simply by possessing goods but by the process of acquiring them; consumerism is as much a function of boredom as it is of crass materialism.

What has this to do with rejection of the past? Simply this: consumerism is predicated on the idea that life can be fulfilling through acquiring something in the future that one does not have in the present. This manifests itself in the whole strategic nature of marketing. For example, every time you switch on your television set, you are bombarded with advertisements that may be for a variety of different goods and services but that all preach basically the same message: what you have now is not enough for happiness; you need something else, something new, in order to find true fulfillment. I believe this reinforces fundamentally negative attitudes toward the past.

Think for a moment: How many readers of this book are wearing clothes they bought ten years ago? How many are using computers they bought five years ago? Or driving automobiles more than fifteen years old? With the exception of vintage car collectors, the economically poor, and those with absolutely no fashion sense, most readers will probably respond in the negative to at least one, if not all three, of these questions. Yet when we ask why this is the case, there is no sensible answer. We can put a man on the moon, so we could probably make an automobile that lasts for fifty years; most of us do little on computers that could not have been done on the machines we owned five years ago; and we all get rid of clothes that still fit us and are quite presentable. So why the need for the new?

A number of factors influence this kind of behavior. First, there is the role of built-in obsolescence: it is not in the manufacturer's best interest to make a washing machine that will last for a hundred years. If that were done, then the manufacturer would likely be out of business within a decade as the market became saturated. Such is a possible but unlikely scenario. Developments in technology mean that longevity will not be the only factor driving the market. Efficiency, for example, or enhanced and multiplied functions might well create a continuing need for more goods. Aesthetics also play a role; the ability to market goods based on aesthetics and image has proved powerful. Remember the cool, sleek look that Apple computers developed at one point? That gave them a clear edge over their rivals.

Second, and related to the first point, we see in the consumer economy a coalescence of aesthetics and a bias to the young in the creation of the so-called youth market, and the closely related marketing of youth to older types like myself. If no eighteen-year-old male believes himself to be mortal, so no middle-aged male wants to appear to be any older than he was twenty years ago. Indeed, with the exception of those odd types (of the kind who read *The Daily Telegraph* in the UK and the *National Review* in the US) who were probably born with comb-overs, receding hairlines, and bottle glasses, it would seem that the market for youth clothing (albeit with slightly expanded waistline sizes) is alive and well long into territory previously reserved for the superannuated and beyond.

In today's topsy-turvy world, youth has status. That is why so many old-timers spend large amounts of money and time trying to hold on to, or even win back, some of its accoutrements, whether by purchasing a pair of jeans from the trendiest fashion retailer, buying a male grooming kit, or even undergoing drastic plastic surgery. As harmless as these phenomena are at one level, at another they are part of the larger cultural impulse toward disdain for the past and for old age. We see this not just in fashion, of course, but also in the "wisdom" now invested in young people who are considered competent to opine on complex matters, not *despite* the fact of their relative youth and inexperience but precisely *because of* it. Pop music, a function of youth culture if ever there was one, is perhaps responsible for this. In the last few decades, we have had the pleasure of hearing all manner of people, from Hall & Oates in the eighties to Lady Gaga in the present, telling the world what to do about everything from apartheid to third

world debt to gay marriage. Apparently, the lack of "baggage" (to use the standard pejorative) is an advantage to being able to speak with authority on complex subjects. In other professions, of course—from plumbing to brain surgery and beyond—"baggage" is generally referred to as "appropriate training," but such is the power of a youthful smile, a full head of hair, and a trim waistline that such a perspective does not apply to matters of morality, economics, or the meaning of life in general.

As a postscript, the impact of consumerism is one reason why church sessions and elder boards often spend more time than is decent on discussions about worship and programs. Someone will make the point that certain young people have left because the worship is not to their liking and thus the church needs to rethink how it does things. Laying aside the fact that, for most of us, no church gives us everything we want in worship but we are nonetheless happy to attend because the word is truly preached, it is interesting to note the session member's response: *we* need to do something, to think again about worship. In other words, we need to respond to the needs of the consumer. An alternative approach might be that we need to do a better job of explaining why we do what we do, and what the obligations entailed in solemn vows of membership are; yet this is often not the instinctive reaction to such concerns. The consumer-is-king mentality renders all established and time-tested practices unstable and utterly negotiable.

The Disappearance of "Human Nature"

Another factor that impacts the possibility of documents such as creeds having any usefulness is the disappearance of "human nature" as a category. This is often not done explicitly, except by the most extreme advocates of postmodern skepticism; but functionally the idea of a human nature or "essence" that connects people in one time and place to another is today often neglected or ignored. Numerous factors play into this. Expressive individualism, with its emphasis on the inner, autonomous individual, is intuitively inimical to history as anything more than a story of oppression, as are the dominant narratives of Marxism and critical theory. Further, the modern world has made everyone more acutely aware of the vast variety of social and cultural practices exhibited by different groups. The Englishman of the nineteenth century might have been able to rest secure in the knowledge that taking afternoon tea was the way human beings should act and that

those who did not do so were either weird (if English), dastardly (if French, Italian, or German), or inferior (if otherwise foreign). Now, however, we know that afternoon refreshment practices are scarcely the result of the structure of the human genome. More seriously, we know that practices considered disgusting by one group, such as female circumcision, are yet considered necessary by others. This raises the question of whether there are universal human values and rights and, if so, what criteria are to be used to determine what they are. If eating pork is unacceptable to Jews, does that mean that French pig farmers should be closed down? What, if anything, is the common cultural, ethical, philosophical, or metaphysical core that binds human beings together? Indeed, does such a thing exist?

If "human nature" is nothing more than a specific biological structure that regulates the ability to reproduce, then what authority can anybody or any human document have when it belongs to another time or place? If human nature is really a construct of the particulars of a specific historical, geographical, and cultural context, it is not immediately obvious that, say, a document produced in Constantinople near the end of the fourth century can have any relevance to people living in London or New York at the start of the twenty-first. For historical documents to speak beyond their own time, there has to be some kind of fundamental continuity between their form and content and the present age.

Consumerism plays its part here as well. If you are what you consume, if you can be whatever you want to be, then what binds you to your neighbor? More importantly, what binds you to the people in other times and places? If you are master of your own destiny, then you are free to act toward the past and other people in the same way you act toward the goods on the supermarket shelf. You buy what appeals to you and leave behind that which does not.

The implications for creeds and confessions are obvious. Choose your particular: they were written by dead white males who dressed differently from us, had different attitudes to the world, spoke in a different language, were celibate, were not celibate, never understood technology or listened to Elvis, never grappled with the scientific breakthroughs of recent years, and so on, and so on. If nothing binds us to them, or if the differences between us and them simply overwhelm any analogy there might be between us, then they have nothing useful or relevant to say to us, and we are better

off ignoring them. A world in which human nature is merely a construct put together by the individual or by the specific community in which the individual is placed is a world where historical documents, such as creeds, can have no transcendent significance but are doomed to be of merely local or antiquarian interest.

Words, Mysticism, and Pragmatism

If devaluing the past is one aspect of contemporary culture that militates against the usefulness of creeds and confessions, a second is the current suspicion of words as reliable means of communication.

We need to acknowledge at the outset that there is plenty of evidence for the problematic nature of words. The idea that words are one way to establish and maintain personal power and prestige is deeply rooted. Indeed, a whole school of literary theory has developed around this notion, whereby words have become little more than tools to be used to marginalize and manipulate others. I remember some years ago watching a 1940s Nazi propaganda film entitled *Dasein ohne Leben* ("Being without Life"), which was designed to make the case that children born with severe mental and physical disabilities should be euthanized. The documentary was significant in that it helped pave the way for the social and cultural context in which the broader policies of the Holocaust could be pursued. But what interested me in particular was the way it used those two words—"being" and "life"—as a means of making a manipulative distinction that served to obscure the horror of what was really being proposed. By implying that a child with severe encephalitis possessed a mere existence and no life, by driving that wedge between the two, the child was effectively and quietly robbed of personhood and thus of status. The words were not being used to convey information; they were being used to create a reality and one that, in the wake of the Holocaust, looks vile and manipulative.

One could add to this many examples drawn from the sphere of politics, perhaps the most notorious realm for such linguistic twisting. In short, the case for words being susceptible to manipulative usage is not one that can be credibly questioned. Such has led to a broader cultural cynicism about language, which has bled over into the church. The notion that Christianity is a way of life and not a set of propositions has become something of a mantra among younger Christians in the last ten years. Of course, like

most erroneous notions, it contains just enough truth and has just enough legitimate criticism of alternative positions to be credible. Indeed, one of its underlying concerns—that Christianity not terminate in a mere intellectualism—is surely legitimate, even if the sweeping terms in which this is expressed clearly involve an unbiblical reduction of Christianity to praxis. It is not actually that original: Desiderius Erasmus, Richard Baxter, and Adolf von Harnack, to name but three, all offered variations (of differing degrees of orthodoxy) on this theme. Yet the frequency with which it occurs in the history of the church indicates that at least some of the concerns it seeks to address must be legitimate.

In addition to the obvious problems with the way language has been used by people such as politicians, and how sophisticated literary theorists have dismantled old linguistic certainties, there is also a popular strain of mysticism (for want of a better word) that pervades modern culture and that is profoundly suspicious of words. This takes various forms. One thinks, for example, of the notion that certain emotional sentiments or responses constitute truth, something that is often epitomized by the kind of statements made with remarkable regularity on television talk shows. "I just know in my heart that it is true" is built on this kind of thinking. Many of us no doubt have encountered ethical argumentation that amounts to, or perhaps is even expressed as, "It feels so good. How can it possibly be wrong?"[2]

Again, we might turn to popular music to provide a summary of this kind of thinking—if the reader will forgive the obvious incoherence of using words to undermine confidence in words. Madonna's song, "Bedtime Stories" declares that words are useless and, indeed, even more useless when they occur in sentences. In saying this, she actually makes a profound point: the modern emphasis on emotions as the locus of truth or, to use the trendier term, "authenticity," is fundamentally non- and even antiverbal. When someone declares that they "just know in their heart" that the latest singer or pop trend is the greatest phenomenon of Western musical culture since Bach left the organ loft for the last time, you may know that they are talking arrant nonsense, but there is no way that you can refute this person's claim because it is not a claim expressed using public criteria commonly

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2 For all the plausibility of such emotive arguments in modern culture when it comes to, say, teenagers sleeping together, we still live in an age when, thankfully, this is not yet considered a plausible justification for serial killers.

known as words and logic. It is a purely personal, subjective judgment; and, in its claim to truth, it makes truth something mystical, something to be experienced, not something subject to normal criteria of public evaluation.

To have such an attitude so deeply embedded in popular culture— whether pop songs or talk shows or the visceral level of public discourse one often witnesses on the television in scenes outside courthouses, political rallies, and sporting events—would in itself create plenty of difficulties for the notion of creeds and confessions. Yet we see the impact of suspicion of words even within the Christian church. At the Reformation, preaching came to supplant the Mass as the central act of corporate Christian worship; underlying this shift was a move toward an understanding of the gospel as promise and of salvation as being by faith in that promise. Thus, proclamation of that promise in words moved to center stage. In recent decades, however, many churches have shifted preaching from this central place. In some contexts, preaching has not been abandoned; rather, it has been relativized and now stands alongside dramatic performances, candles, incense, and small group discussion. In other contexts, preaching has been pushed completely aside for conversational discourse, where the authoritative voice of the preacher has been replaced by a more democratic dialogue. Underlying all these shifts, in practice if not always in terms of self-conscious planning, is a suspicion that proclaimed words are no longer a reliable authority or, perhaps better, a *plausible* authority, given the wider antiverbal cultural dispositions.

Populist suspicion of words is not the only point at which the antiverbal mystical emphasis bites the church. Such also has deep and highly sophisticated roots within the history of modern theology. For example, this kind of mysticism is analogous to the kind of revision of the notion of Christian theology that took place at the hands of Friedrich Schleiermacher, the so-called father of Liberalism, at the start of the nineteenth century. In the wake of the Enlightenment, and particularly in response to Immanuel Kant's critique of traditional epistemologies, Schleiermacher sought to rebuild the Christian faith in a manner that would be plausible in his context. As the notions of objective truth and of the possibility of generalizing universal truths from the particulars of history had been abandoned, Schleiermacher offered an account of Christian theology that understood doctrine not so much as statements about the nature of God as a description of religious

psychology. Thus, for example, predestination ceased to be what it appeared on paper to be—a statement about God's eternal purpose relative to men and women—and became rather a poetic expression of the feeling of total dependence upon God as experienced by the religious individual. Further, Christ became supremely important as the incarnation of God not because he was the incarnate God in the traditional manner defined by the Chalcedonian Definition of 451, but rather because in him the consciousness of God was supremely manifested.

Within such a framework, then, propositional, doctrinal Christianity (and the creeds and confessions that epitomized it) was exchanged for something mystical and experiential. Of course, to tar this with the label "liberalism" is likely to precipitate an immediate reaction from self-styled conservative evangelicals. Liberalism is the enemy; it is what "they" hold to—whoever "they" are—and not something of which we are guilty ourselves. Yet mysticism is alive and well within evangelical circles. Anyone who has ever been told by a friend that the Lord led such a friend to do something completely silly, or anyone who has ever been at a Bible study where the burden has been to explain "what the text means to me," regardless of what the words on the page and the grammar and syntax might otherwise indicate, has experienced an evangelical mysticism that is not really distinguishable from traditional liberalism at the level of its understanding of what constitutes truth.

Closely allied to mysticism is another phenomenon lethal to confessional Christianity: pragmatism, the notion that truth is to be found in usefulness. When one reflects for a moment on talk show–style mysticism, this becomes obvious. When individuals on such shows declare that "I just know in my heart that this is true," what they are often saying is, "This belief works for me; it has some actual, practical result that I like." Whether the belief makes them more cheerful, helps them feel more important, or gives them hope for better times ahead, the important factor is not so much the content of the belief as its result.

Such thinking pervades much of modern church life. I noted above the student in class who questioned the usefulness of creeds and confessions today. By her application of such a category to the creeds, she immediately indicated the pragmatic tendency of her thinking. We might also reflect upon the pragmatic content of so many books written by and for evangeli-

cal Christians. Here, for example, is the Amazon blurb for *The Eden Diet: A Biblical and Merciful Weight Loss Program*:

> The Eden Diet helps readers understand the many reasons why they have not been able to lose weight in the past. In most cases, they fail to eat according to their God-given internal sensations—their hunger pangs. Hunger was meant to be a compass that tells people when and how much to eat. However, most overweight people eat for external reasons that have little to do with hunger. They eat according to the clock, because of automatic habits, in response to their emotions and fleshly desires, or in response to tantalizing advertising messages. The Eden Diet shows how to overcome those fattening habits. It explains how to eat in response to the body's internal signals, how to block out external stimuli that trigger eating, and how to lose weight and achieve the abundant life God intended for His children in the beginning. Specific advice is given that helps readers eat for weight loss at pot luck events, buffets, at restaurants, on holidays and special occasions, and any time they are faced with challenging emotions and sinful desires.[3]

This book was even available as an audio download from a well-known evangelical publisher. Indeed, there have been quite a few evangelical diet books with titles such as *Fit for My King: His Princess Diet Plan and Devotional*; *The Maker's Diet: The 40-Day Health Experience That Will Change Your Life Forever*; the two-volume *Never Say Diet Personal Fitness Trainer*; and the intriguing but presumably overstated *The New Bible Cure for Cancer*.

The existence of such books within Christianity is a study in itself, since it speaks eloquently about a range of topics, from how people understand the essence of Christianity to what they see as the ideal Christian life. For our purpose here, it is sufficient to note the profound pragmatism that these titles indicate: Christianity is all about what it can do for you in the here and now. Similar genres exist within the evangelical world for financial planning, education, and self-fulfillment. All are evidence that the pragmatism of the wider world is alive and well within the walls of the church.

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3   Amazon.com book description of Rita M. Hancock, *The Eden Diet: A Biblical and Merciful Christian Weight Loss Program* (Oklahoma City: Personalized Fitness Products, 2008), https://www.amazon.com/.

In such a culture, it is not surprising that creeds and confessions do not appear particularly useful. One will search in vain in the creeds of the ancient church for advice on how to stop excessive snacking between meals or on how to avoid a second trip to the dessert table at a potluck lunch. Further, while I cannot claim comprehensive knowledge of every confessional document written during the Reformation, none, as far as I know, offer the reader a personal trainer, a wonderful "health experience," financial prosperity, or a cure for cancer. By the standards of the culture that has produced the Eden diet, one would have to say that the confessional heritage of the church is really rather useless.

Finally, remember that the comment about the irrelevance of creeds and confessions was made by a student who was a member of a confessional church in one of my classes at a confessional seminary. It is not only the less doctrinally informed areas of evangelicalism that have been impacted by the priorities of Oprah and company. Ask yourself this: If my church put on a conference about how to have a great Christian marriage and fulfilled sex life, would more or fewer people attend than if we did one on the importance of the incarnation or the Trinity? The answer to that question allows an interesting comparison between the priorities of the church today and those of the fourth and fifth centuries. It is not that the people in your church do not believe that, say, Christ rose from the dead and the tomb was empty; rather, it is that such belief has no real usefulness to them other than as it provides them with what they are looking to obtain in the here and now. In such a context, orthodoxy as expressed in the great creeds and confessions is not rejected; it is simply sidelined as irrelevant and essentially useless.

Antiauthoritarianism

If there are deep forces within our culture that militate against creeds and confessions on the basis of their nature as historical and linguistic documents, there are also forces that strike deep at these documents in terms of their origin and their status. Creeds and confessions are, by definition, statements made by institutions (churches), and they derive their practical authority from their connection to such institutions. It is true that some confessions have a single author. The Belgic Confession, written by the French Protestant Guido de Bres, is one obvious example; but it possesses its authority because it has been adopted by a church as an authoritative

document. In the case of the Belgic Confession, this adoptive action was taken by the Synod of Dordt, which met in 1618–1619 in the city of Dordrecht in the Netherlands. It is the sanction of a corporate body that gives the confession its legal ecclesiastical status, not the specific identity of the author.

This institutional aspect of creeds and confessions is culturally problematic. Indeed, if anything marks the contemporary world it is surely suspicion of external authority. One might generalize and say that the issues noted above—with expressive individualism, science, technology, consumerism, language, mysticism, and pragmatism—are all variations on the theme of rejection of external authority, that of the past in the case of science and technology, and that of anything but the self in terms of consumerism, language, and the rest.

Of course, this rejection of external authority is ultimately rather selective. While many today reject traditional forms of external authority (family hierarchies, civil governments, traditional moral values, etc.), those same people often accept rather uncritically other forms of external authority. Think, for example, of the mindless emulation of the fashions of pop stars by their fans; or the incredibly naive confidence that is often placed in the opinions of vacuous and ill-informed celebrities on, say, third world debt or global warming, as opposed to those of traditional experts. Youth culture is the same: Why on earth would anyone want the opinion of the latest teenage pop star on anything unless he was convinced that knowledge gained by experience, knowledge from "out there," was actually a hindrance to truth and not a means of accessing it? Yet the blogs and the news media crave the views of celebrities on all kinds of things of which they are technically ignorant and actually incapable of expressing themselves with any coherence or thoughtfulness. They are authorities not because of their knowledge or skills but because of their status in our modern consumer society; and the fact that they are relatively young (or like to think that they are, as in the case of the superannuated Bono) is strangely seen as a plus, an advantage, something that qualifies them to make these statements. As I noted above, it is hard to imagine applying the same criteria to, say, electricians or brain surgeons, where age and experience are typically seen as essential qualifications. Strange to tell, on the bigger questions and problems of the world and society, having "relevant training and knowledge" is more likely to earn one excoriation as "an ivory tower academic" or part of the dreaded

"establishment" than a useful contributor to any proposed solution. Lady Gaga or some random person on X (formerly Twitter) is apparently more likely to have the answer to human sexuality or third world debt than a minister or an economist. Arguably, therefore, the rejection of external authority needs to be carefully defined as the rejection of *traditional forms* of external authority in order to be an accurate statement.

Even with this qualification, however, the church—or at least the traditional church, with its structures of governance, its established ways of doing things, and its creeds and confessions—fares badly. Ironically, the old forms of authority have been replaced by new ones; self-appointed gurus abound, as do theological and antitheological potboilers. But my concern is not with passing fads; it is with a recovering of traditional and, as I argue, biblical patterns of institutional authority.

First, however, it is worth spending a few moments examining why respect for traditional external authority is at such a pitiable state today. It is clear that the same forces that made consumerism an antihistorical force also militate against traditional institutional authority. Consumerism is built upon the notion of the construction of self-identity through consumption. Fashions in clothing are a great example of this. Whether it is the shirt of one's favorite sports team or a style of dress adopted by one's favorite celebrity, at the heart of fashion is the notion that by purchasing certain goods one can create an identity for oneself.

Broadening out from fashion, the world of commercial advertising is predicated on this kind of self-creating consumption. Commercials are not simply designed to create dissatisfaction with the present and thus to orient the audience toward the future; they are also designed to send the signal that you can make yourself different, you can become the ideal person you wish to be, by purchasing some particular goods or services. This strategy is not simply a matter of creating needs; it is also about sending a message that you are master of your own universe. The Nike sales pitch "Just do it!" might as easily be written "Just be it!" for, with a credit card in your pocket, you can become whatever you want to be. Authority lies within you, or at least that is the message the sales and marketing people wish to send; external authority is merely a repressive force that prevents you from being whoever and whatever you wish to be. And all this is played out against the background of a culture in which expressive individualism is the normative notion of selfhood. Fertile soil indeed.

We also see a kind of mysticism and pragmatism in antiauthoritarianism, where the locus of authority is ultimately not an external institution or body of knowledge but rather the inner being of the person. If "it" is "true for me" because "I just know it in my heart," then guess what? "My heart," whether that is a feeling of happiness or of self-esteem or of whatever, is the authority: internal, mystical, appointed by me using pragmatic criteria and as far away from any notion of direct external or institutional authority as is possible. Of course, it does not take a genius to realize that so much of what we "just know in our hearts" does actually come from external authorities—commercials, idiotic talk shows, television pundits—but that is not the point. The point is that we do not consciously understand this or recognize such authorities as having that effect.

One further factor that militates against traditional notions of external institutional authority is the internet, specifically the world of blogs and tweets and Wikipedia, where discussion is highly democratized. This does not mean that nothing useful or profound is ever communicated in these ways—although one would be hard-pressed to find anything that qualified for either adjective on X (formerly Twitter). But it does mean that the whole notion of traditional authority, rooted in traditional institutions—publishing houses, newspapers, opinion magazines—is now highly attenuated at best.

It seems clear to me that this anti-institutional tendency is deep-rooted even within churches that, on paper, place a premium on structure and authority. For example, in my own denomination, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), we have a book of church order that lays out the basic structures of the church and the procedures by which these are to be maintained. Office-bearers (ministers, elders, deacons) take strict vows that bind them to particular doctrinal positions (the Westminster Standards) but also to the denomination and the local congregation. All the office-bearers with whom I have been privileged to serve over the years have taken their vows very seriously.

What is less often noted, however, is that members, too, take vows. In the OPC these vows are not the same as those of office-bearers. This is for good reason; the qualifications for office-bearing, as opposed to being a member, are somewhat more stringent, as we shall explore in a later chapter. But while the content of the vows for members may be less stringent in terms of specifics, they are no less serious in terms of their binding quality.

In the OPC they involve profession of faith in the Trinity, trust in Christ for salvation, and commitment to the local body and submission under God—a key qualification—to the elders.

What never ceases to amaze me is the casual way in which people make and break membership vows, sometimes within weeks. I have seen individuals leave the church because they were not given the Sunday school teaching opportunities they thought they deserved, because they did not like the worship style, and because their children found a more interesting church elsewhere. That such reasons do not give any grounds for breaking vows never seems to register. Indeed, some leave without giving any reason at all, so lightly do they regard solemn vows taken before God and the church.

Now, I would never advocate that someone cannot leave a church at which they are extremely unhappy; and thankfully, there is provision for people to be able to move if they decide to. Cults take away people's freedom; the church should never do that. But there are processes by which this can be done, typically through discussion with the elders, which actually seek to honor the integrity of the vows. What is striking is that these processes are, in my experience, rarely used as they should be. Often the first thing that the elders hear is that somebody has already left and would like a letter of transfer to his new church or simply to be erased from the membership rolls.

What this phenomenon tells me is that the suspicion of, or (perhaps better) indifference to, the external authority of institutions is as deeply embedded in the culture of the contemporary church as it is in society. And such an attitude inevitably affects the way creeds and confessions are viewed. The person who has no real, practical respect for the church as an institution is inevitably going to have little respect for the documents that the church has produced and/or authorized as part of the basic means by which she identifies herself, witnesses to the world, and maintains some level of order within her ranks.

The Fear of Exclusion

One further cultural proclivity worth mentioning is that of the fear of exclusion, of drawing boundaries such that some people belong and other people do not. In addressing this matter, it is important to note that much of the tragedy of human history, particularly more recent history, has been wrapped up with the problem of exclusion. One need only to think of the

Armenian genocide of 1915–1916, the Holocaust, the Rape of Nanking, the Balkan crisis, and the gassing of the Kurds to understand how vicious some forms of exclusion can be. Racism is only the most obvious; we all can think of other, less obvious forms of exclusion that also help justify crimes, great and small, perpetrated by one group of human beings against others.

Such forms of exclusion have left many with a lasting fear of anything that might smack of looking down on others as inferior. In the silly extremes of political correctness, it almost seems that anything at which I choose to take offense is to be deemed oppressive, exclusionary, and on the slippery slope to some form of genocide or holocaust. Yet we must not allow the excesses of the politically correct types to blind us to the truly genuine concerns that underlie this fear of exclusion; nor must we be blind to the impact that fear has on attitudes to statements of faith and confessions.

A confession is a positive statement of belief; but in making a positive statement of belief, it inevitably excludes those who disagree with its content. Even the most tenuous confessions do this: the Unitarian may claim a creedless faith, but he is never going to invite a Trinitarian, who insists upon the nonnegotiability of the Trinity, to fill his pulpit; Trinitarians are therefore excluded. And if it is true that the creedless faith of the Unitarian inevitably excludes some, how much truer is this of orthodox Christian creeds and confessions? The Athanasian Creed is the most spectacular of these as it contains not only positive statement of Christian doctrine but also anathemas against those who disagree with its teaching. It is explicitly, not merely implicitly, an instrument of exclusion.

Trajectories of thought that take their cue from traditional Christian liberalism have little or no patience with such exclusivism, of course, because they see doctrinal statements not as transcendent truth claims but as expressions of the religious psychology of the individual or the particular religious community. Whether the inspiration for this is the kind of Kantian theology of Schleiermacher or the linguistic philosophy of Wittgenstein, the net result is the same: the truth claims of one community do not apply in any real or straightforward way to another; thus the problem of excluding some is localized and limited. This is my truth; tell me yours (to quote the title of the Manic Street Preachers' 1998 album).

The last few decades have intensified this fear of exclusion particularly when it comes to religion. The impact of religiously motivated or religiously

expressed terrorism such as the attack on American institutions on Sep-
tember 11, 2001, has created a cultural atmosphere scarcely conducive to
exclusive religious truth claims. One can see this in various responses that
have been offered to the rise of alleged religious radicalism. There is the
increasingly commonplace use of the catchall term "fundamentalism" and
its cognates that presumably lumps anyone who takes their religion seri-
ously together under the same scary category, the wild-eyed Jihadist suicide
bomber and the aged Amish grandmother. That fundamentalism equals
violence is virtually a given for many. "Christian Nationalism" is perhaps
the latest of such terms, being applied to those on the truly racist fringe
of society as well as to Christians who simply take patriotic pride in their
country. The fear underlying this spectrum of usage is the same: a fear of
denigrating and excluding somebody in an unfair, even dangerous, way.

   Reaction within the religious world to this cultural moment is interest-
ing. Within Christian circles, the decade after 9/11 saw the rise and fall of
the cluster of movements grouped together as the emergent church, with
its emphasis on Christianity as a way of life, not a set of doctrines, and its
prioritizing of belonging before believing. This latter slogan, of course,
can make sense only if belonging and believing are actually separable
in a more than merely formal way. Such a notion is, in the case of many
emergent leaders, built on assumed postmodern epistemologies. These
are themselves in origin connected to the rise of postcolonialism, with its
fear of the hegemony of the white man's religion and the imperialist use
of Western ideologies, of which Christianity is perhaps the most obvious
and historically influential.

   This fear has meant that a Christianity that is committed to truth claims
that apply beyond the community of faith or that exclude certain people
from that community is profoundly at odds with the cultural current.
Strange to tell, we do still live in societies that routinely exclude people.
The fact that prisons are full to bursting indicates that society still considers
some forms of behavior to be unacceptable and demands their exclusion
from mainstream social life. Legislation against discrimination on the basis
of race, creed, or sexual orientation indicates that some views are beyond
the pale, and those who hold them are not to express them in practical
terms in the public sphere. Yet religion, particularly traditional religion,
finds itself at a cultural moment when it is feared because it dares to say

that some beliefs and practices are true and good while others are false and bad. Such a moment is scarcely conducive to any form of creedalism or confessionalism.

One further, and perhaps unusual, example of this fear of exclusion is the phenomenon known as evangelicalism, typically understood as a conservative, orthodox form of Protestantism marked by an emphasis on conversion and evangelism. Evangelicalism is a somewhat balkanized phenomenon, and its various tribes, or subtribes, often have little difficulty in drawing lines that exclude others who regard themselves as evangelicals from their own particular group. Nevertheless, what evangelicalism in all its forms typically does is prioritize parachurch institutions over and above the church. Whether we are talking about the National Association of Evangelicals or The Gospel Coalition in the United States, or the Evangelical Alliance or Affinity in Britain, we are talking about coalition movements, and coalition movements by their very definition require broad statements of faith.

These groups all have statements of faith; but they are statements of faith designed to keep in the tent all the various sects of which the clan chiefs approve. Thus, matters that are vital to the constitution of actual churches (a clear position on baptism, for example) are typically left to one side, on the grounds that the parachurch leaders do not wish to exclude people because of such matters. The statements are therefore often brief and, compared to, say, the Belgic Confession or the Westminster, highly attenuated.

This is not necessarily a problem, provided that nobody forgets that these groups are not churches and that they are therefore always to be subordinate to churches in the way Christians think about the practical outworking of their faith. Too often, however, the impression is given that these groups, representing this nebulous phenomenon "evangelicalism," consider themselves to be the higher synthesis and the context where the real action takes place. The culture that such an attitude reflects ultimately tends to send the message to Christians that issues such as baptism are of minor importance, and that the matters that divide denominations are trivial and even sinful in the way they keep Presbyterians and Baptists from belonging to the same church. This is, ironically, not a million miles from the wider culture's fear of exclusion.

Conclusion

In outlining various cultural factors that militate against the use of creeds and confessions in the church, I am not arguing that every minister or every believer who declares they have "no creed but the Bible" is necessarily in thrall to all or any of the above. Indeed, some of the most militant "no creed" people I have ever come across have been very much on the hard-line separatist wing of the Christian church and scarcely vulnerable to accusations that they are capitulating to the wider cultural fear of excluding someone. They have a legitimate fear that creeds and confessions can end up in certain circumstances supplanting Scripture and becoming the sole authority in the way the church operates.

What we have seen, however, is that there are powerful currents within modern life that militate in various ways against the positive use of creeds and confessions in the church. These currents often go unnoticed by those of us who have no choice but to live, move, and have our being within them. Thus, the pastor who thinks he is being biblical by declaring he has no creed but the Bible may actually, upon reflection, find that his position is more shaped by the modern world than he at first realized. Rather than instinctively taking his cue from the historic practices of the church, he may in fact really be shaped by the wider world. The stories the modern world tells us are powerful: the pervasive influence of expressive individualism; the future-oriented promise of science; the technology that privileges the young; the materialistic paradise offered by consumerism; which is always just around the next corner; the dying of confidence in words; the fragmentation of human nature; the distrust of traditional structures and notions of authority; and the wicked results of saying that somebody else is wrong and does not belong. All these in their different ways make the idea of doctrinal Christianity, expressed in creeds and confessions, both implausible and distasteful; and all of them are part of the cultural air we all breathe.

This leads to a very important distinction. Modern culture has not really rendered creeds and confessions untrue; far less has it rendered them unbiblical. But it has rendered them implausible and distasteful. They are implausible because they are built on old-fashioned notions of truth and language. They make the claim that a linguistic formulation of a state of affairs can have a binding authority beyond the mere text on the page,

that creeds actually refer to something, and that that something has a significance for all humanity. They thus demand that individuals submit, intellectually and morally, to something outside themselves, that they listen to the voices from the church from other times and other places. They go directly against the grain of an antihistorical, antiauthoritarian age. Creeds strike hard at the cherished notion of human autonomy and the notion that I am exceptional, that the normal rules do not apply to me in the way they do to others.

They are distasteful for the same reason: because they make old-fashioned truth claims; and to claim that one position is true is to automatically claim that its opposite is false. God cannot exist and not exist at the same time; he cannot be three persons and one person at the same time, at least not without unhelpful and hopeless equivocation (despite the claims of some Reformed theologians to the contrary). Truth claims thus imply a hierarchy whereby one position is better than another and where some beliefs, and thus those who hold those beliefs, are excluded. That may not be a very tasteful option in today's society, but, as noted above, even the modern pluralist West still excludes those that it considers, if not wrong, at least distasteful and unpleasant.

We are naive as Christians if we think that our thinking is not shaped by the cultural currents that surround us. Of course, we cannot abstract ourselves from our context; we cannot cease to be embodied individuals, each with our own personal biographies, who live within a complex network of social relations that influence the way we live and think and speak. Yet to know something of our context is to make ourselves aware of some of the invisible forces that have such an unconscious influence on us. Once we know they are there, we at least have the possibility of engaging in critical reflection, which will allow us, to some extent, to liberate ourselves from them—or, if not to liberate ourselves, at least to make us more aware of why we think the way we do.

Thus, I conclude this chapter by posing a challenge to those who, in their earnest desire to be faithful to Scripture as the supreme authority of faith and life, claim that they have no creed but the Bible. Reflect critically on the cultural forces that are certainly consonant with holding such a position and ask yourself whether they have perhaps reinforced your antipathy to creeds and confessions in a way that is not directly related to the Bible's own

teaching at all. Then, setting aside for just a moment your sincere convictions on this matter, read the rest of this book and see whether creeds and confessions might not actually provide you with a better way of preserving precisely those aspects of biblical, Christian faith that are most valuable to you and that you passionately wish to communicate to your church.