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TODAY

*Confessional Faith in a
Faithless Age*

J. V. FESKO

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Introduction

Within the American religious psyche, there is an antipathy and distrust of tradition. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82) embodied this negative disposition: “Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations behold God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes.”¹ Instead of looking at religion through the eyes of our predecessors, Emerson believed individuals should look on revelation with their own eyes: “Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? . . . There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.”² But Emerson’s conception of religion was decidedly different from the faith of his forebears. Nature was, for him, the chief book in the divine library, and its mystical message was something that refused to be captured in propositions.³ Clouding revelation with propositions would make the savant unpoetic.⁴ Moreover, reading books was for idle times. When a person can read God directly, “the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men’s transcripts of their readings.”⁵

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in *Essays & Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 7.

2. Emerson, “Nature,” 7.

3. Emerson, “Nature,” 40.

4. Emerson, “Nature,” 43.

5. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in *Essays & Lectures*, 58.

We are each, therefore, our own priest as we eschew the thoughts of others in favor of directly reading God through nature. Rather than deriving knowledge from other great minds, the truly mature person must discover that the fountain of all good is found within.⁶

Emerson sowed seeds that spawned a negative view of traditions, creeds, and Scripture and a positive view of individuals forming their own religious outlooks for themselves. Prayers and the dogmas of the church were merely historical markers that showed how high the waters of faith once rose.⁷ The church's dogmas were not supposed to be permanent boundary markers to distinguish orthodoxy from heterodoxy. To this end, Emerson opines, "Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost—cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity."⁸ These sentiments struck a chord with a number of American scholars and theologians. Emerson influenced a new generation of Unitarian theologians;⁹ and American jurist and Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. (1841–1935) submitted that Emerson's lecture "The American Scholar" was "our intellectual Declaration of Independence."¹⁰ Emerson cast the die, and American religion would bear these characteristics for generations to come.

Harold Bloom (1930–2019) documented the American religious phenomenon as individualistic and mystical: Jesus is not a first-century Jew but a contemporary American who also happens to be the first person to be resurrected from the dead. As a trailblazer, he shows others the way to salvation. Bloom notes the problem: "What was missing in all this quite private luminosity was simply most of historic Christianity." Now, in all fairness, Bloom celebrated this doctrinal evolution.¹¹ Nevertheless, Bloom's observation confirms that 150 years later, Emerson's style of individualistic religion still thrives. Injected with the steroids of revivalism, American religion has

6. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Divinity School Address," in *Essays & Lectures*, 78.

7. Emerson, "Divinity School Address," 85.

8. Emerson, "Divinity School Address," 89.

9. Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805–1900* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 58–80.

10. Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1886), 115.

11. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Chu Hartley, 2006), 54.

produced an ahistorical brand with celebrities that have transcended their own denominational trappings. Charles Finney (1792–1875) was supposedly a Presbyterian, and Billy Graham (1918–2018) claimed to be a Southern Baptist, but both gave little attention to the doctrinal distinctives of their respective denominations.¹² Bloom notes, unsurprisingly, that American religion tends to eschew a sense of the communal.¹³ And Americans have only accelerated down the individualism highway in the age of the internet.

Technology has propelled levels of individualism to increasingly greater heights. Psychologist Jean Twenge writes of the latest generation to come of age, which she calls “iGen.”¹⁴ This generation comprises one-quarter of the American population, and they are disengaging from religion at alarming rates. In the 1960s, 93 percent of college students affiliated with a religion; that figure had dropped to 68 percent by 2016. Among iGen’ers, disavowing religious beliefs is more socially acceptable than it was for previous generations.¹⁵ Their generation tends to look at ancient religious texts as merely the creations of fallible human beings, and they generally think that whatever of value religion might offer appears elsewhere with less baggage.¹⁶ Today’s young people are radically individualized and willing to carve out their own private religious beliefs or to rest content in deliberate, blissful ignorance. One of the reasons that participation in organized religion is on the decline is the “American culture’s increasing focus on individualism,” the idea that people can and should make their own choices.¹⁷ In a technological world where the average life span of a smartphone app is less than thirty days, what hope is there that iGens will open ancient books and engage texts that go back thousands of years, or that they will embrace traditional religion?¹⁸

12. Bloom, *American Religion*, 63.

13. Bloom, *American Religion*, 56.

14. Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (New York: Atria Books, 2017).

15. Twenge, *iGen*, 121–22.

16. Twenge, *iGen*, 122–23.

17. Twenge, *iGen*, 138.

18. Kevin Kelly, *The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces That Will Shape Our Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 11.

In such a context, a book on the importance of confessions of faith might seem dead on arrival. But first impressions are not always accurate. As we look back on the development of American religion, we can say that the use of confessions of faith has been in decline overall, yet there are two important factors that we should consider. First, in spite of the rise of religious individualism, a minority of Christians has continued to employ confessions of faith. This minority includes Christians of all stripes, but my own interests and loyalties lie with Reformed Christianity. This branch of Christianity stands in the theological tradition that emerged from the sixteenth-century Reformation and has been codified in the Westminster Standards (including the Confession and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms) and the Three Forms of Unity (the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, and the Heidelberg Catechism). Second, if we take a step back and look at the big picture of the last two thousand years of church history, such a perspective quickly reveals that confessional Christianity has dominated the scene. The rise of individualism in the last two hundred years is anomalous. This is not to say that individualism will soon fade away like the morning mist. But the church has historically employed confessions of faith, and that trend will continue. Still, given the rise of individualism, we presently stand at a crossroads where we must reassess and refamiliarize ourselves with the biblical necessity and the practical virtues of confessions of faith.

Argument and Plan of the Book

Argument

This book defends the thesis that confessions of faith are therefore necessary for both the being (*esse*) and the well-being (*bene esse*) of the church. In other words, confessions of faith are not merely beneficial or wise, and thus helpful to the church (although they certainly are these things). Rather, the Bible teaches that the church should create its own confessions of faith in order to pass on to future generations the faith once delivered to the saints. Such a claim might seem indefensible, especially in our present climate of hyperindividualism. Nevertheless, the historical witness of the last two thousand years

of church history and the widespread use of confessions of faith by Western and Eastern churches, Protestant and Roman Catholic, ancient and contemporary, confirm the validity of this thesis.

Plan

The first chapter explores eight biblical texts, demonstrating that the Bible instructs the church to create confessions of faith. When God told the Israelites to tell future generations the meaning of the Passover, he commanded parents to catechize their children in Israel's faith. They had a divinely given *traditio* that they were supposed to pass down from generation to generation. God also gave to Israel a basic confession of faith in the Shema, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut. 6:4). This confession was a guard-rail against heterodoxy, a statement of doctrinal truth upon which Israel was supposed to meditate, a confessional truth that inspired love and devotion to God. The apostle Paul picks up these themes in his Pastoral Epistles when he rehearses his "trustworthy sayings," statements that the early church created based on the teaching of Jesus. The church was not supposed to mimic Christ's teaching but to soak it in and to pass it down to future generations so that they too would love God and one another. Love lies at the heart of a biblically subordinated confessionalism.

The second chapter rehearses the history of confessions in the Reformed tradition from 1500 to 1700. Since the nineteenth century, many Reformed theologians have believed that post-Reformation confessions distorted the theology of the Protestant Reformation with their increasingly detailed, scholastic approaches. As common as this criticism has been, this chapter demonstrates that the post-Reformation confessions stand in continuity with their Reformation-era predecessors. The differences between the confessions of the two periods lie in the rise of intra-Protestant disputes and in debates with Roman Catholics. The confessions of both eras are also different because they arose under different historical circumstances and because the later confessions were written by committees of theologians rather than by individual Reformers. As greater numbers of theologians contributed, increased precision as well as deliberate doctrinal ambiguity was necessary to accommodate at times conflicting views.

In other words, even though critics often characterize confessions as doctrinal straitjackets, in addition to drawing lines to mark the boundaries between true and false doctrine, those drafting these confessions also drew circles to make room for multiple views within the bounds of orthodoxy.

The third chapter considers why confessions of faith have largely fallen into disuse in the American ecclesiastical scene. It touches on some of the present-day reasons confessions have been neglected, but it also delves into the sixteenth century for deeper answers. The sixteenth-century Reformation holds the seeds of both confession-alism and anticonfessionalism. Doctrinal skepticism was used as an engine of theological warfare, and it quickly grew out of control and contributed to the Enlightenment devaluation of tradition and to the wholesale rejection of confessions of faith. But the blame for anticonfessionalism does not lie exclusively in the hands of critics; proponents of confessions shoulder some of the blame. Theological conviction and violence went hand in hand; one of history's most brutal conflicts was fought along confessional lines, Protestant versus Catholic, and this too contributed to the large-scale rejection of confessions of faith. If it is going to put confessions to proper use, the church must own up to past abuses and take measures to ensure that the same errors do not arise in the future.

The fourth chapter addresses a number of the benefits of confessions of faith. Complementing the first chapter, which largely deals with confessions and the *esse* (being) of the church, this chapter explores how confessions serve the church's *bene esse* (well-being). Confessions of faith serve as boundary markers to distinguish orthodoxy from heterodoxy, create room for a diversified orthodoxy, and connect the church to its historic witness. That is, confessions allow the church to practice what G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) called the “democracy of the dead”; this is the idea that, when trying to decide a difficult question, we should not merely consult the living; wisdom dictates that we also consult the dead by means of old books and, I would add, confessions.¹⁹ The church did not begin when you or I

19. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy: The Romance of Faith* (1908; repr., New York: Doubleday, 1990), 48.

joined its ranks; it has existed for millennia. Throughout that time, Christ has given teachers to the church as gifts, and we ignore them at our own peril (Eph. 4:11–12).

The fifth chapter examines a little-known episode in church history when a delegate to the Synod of Dort (1618–19) challenged a colleague to a duel to the death over a doctrinal disagreement. This chapter shows that even when engaged in the most sacred of tasks, such as writing a confession of faith, the church has at times allowed the world to mold the church into its own likeness, thereby shaping its conduct in sinful ways. The “duel that almost was” serves as a perennial warning. We must not allow the contaminants of sin to infect either the confessions or the confession-writing process as we seek to pass down the faith once delivered to the saints. Again, confessions of faith are not about cold doctrinal precision but about ensuring that the church preserves the faith so that we can love our triune God and our neighbors and pass the truth down to future generations.

The book then concludes with summary observations about the importance of confessions of faith for the future of the church.

Conclusion

Sometimes truth sounds strange, even hostile to our sensibilities. This may be the case for us as we encounter the church’s confessions of faith from within our individualistic culture. Nevertheless, there are good biblical reasons for creating and passing down confessions of faith. When we create, profess, and pass confessions down to future generations, we do not propagate the dead faith of the living but the living faith of the dead.²⁰ We practice the “democracy of the dead” and join hands with the saints from ages past to give witness to the lordship of the triune God and the redemption that comes through the gospel of Christ.

20. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 43.

ONE



Biblical Arguments for Confessions

Introduction

As democracy spread throughout the burgeoning United States of America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ideals of freedom and Christianity mingled and gave birth to a decidedly American form of religion. Barton W. Stone (1772–1844), Thomas Campbell (1763–1845), and Thomas’s son Alexander Campbell (1788–1866) were leaders of the Restoration movement (also known as the Stone-Campbell movement), which wanted to peel back the layers of accumulated dogma and return Christianity to what they believed was its purest, most primitive form. The movement leaders referred to their break with the Presbyterian church as their “declaration of independence.” And Alexander Campbell encouraged his followers to commemorate July 4, 1776, as a day equal to the Jewish Passover. That is to say, Stone and the Campbells created a populist movement that rode on the winds of American democracy and freedom. Instead of confessions of faith, the Stone-Campbell movement trumpeted the

motto “no creed but the Bible.” It was clear that many in the new world had little space for confessional, old-world faith.¹

The anti-creedal movement grew as those churches that embraced theological democracy outpaced their confessional competitors. In 1776, Congregationalist and Presbyterian churches were dominant, holding almost 40 percent of the American churchgoing population. But by 1850, about 54 percent of American churchgoers were attending Baptist and Methodist churches, with Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches together claiming only about 15 percent of the pie.² The sentiment that creeds and confessions were unbiblical, and thus to be rejected, thrived in the nascent nation. Considering how popular the “no creed but the Bible” mentality was and continues to be, we must ask, What does the Bible have to say about confessions?

At first blush, such a question might seem absurd. Some might ask, What does the Spirit-inspired Bible have to do with these all-too-human documents? But closer examination shows that there is biblical evidence to support the claim that confessions of faith are both biblical and necessary. To prove this claim, this chapter surveys eight biblical texts: the institution of the Passover liturgy (Exod. 13:14–15), the giving of the Shema (Deut. 6:4–6), the apostle Paul’s five “trustworthy sayings” (1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:7–9; 2 Tim. 2:11–13; Titus 3:4–8), and Jude’s exhortation to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3).³ Each of these texts captures the idea that God expects his people to take his authoritative revelation, reflect on and study it, restate it in their own words, and pass it down to future generations. The Bible mandates the creation and maintenance of a biblically faithful confessional and catechetical tradition. After surveying the eight texts, the chapter presents an analysis, exploring how the Bible warrants confessions and catechesis, provides protections against dead confessionalism, and reveals an indissoluble link between confession and piety. It then concludes with summary observations about the need for biblically faithful confessions of faith.

1. Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 151–52.

2. Noll, *History of Christianity*, 152–53.

3. For other biblical arguments, see Carl R. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 51–80.

Instruct Future Generations (Exod. 13:14–15)

God’s revelation comes in several different forms, but it is more than a divine memorial, an echo of God’s voice. Israel is supposed to record God’s Word and reflect on it for generations to come. The first time God commands Israel to perform this catechetical task is when he gives instructions for the celebration of the Passover. The Israelites are supposed to reenact, remember, and rationalize the Passover:⁴

And when in time to come your son asks you, “What does this mean?” you shall say to him, “By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.” (Exod. 13:14–15)

As Israelite families gathered and partook of the Passover meal, God knew that younger members of the community would ask about its significance. As children tasted the food and stepped into Israel’s past, their parents would explain the Passover to them. They would recall God’s mighty deliverance from a powerful foe and the judgment that fell upon the firstborn of Egypt, which constituted the rationale for the sacrifice or dedication of the firstborn. This is evident by the use of a result clause: “Therefore [עַל־כֵּן] I sacrifice.” The Bible presents a pattern of God’s word-act-word revelation along with the subsequent, biblically governed reflection on it and repetition and explanation of it.⁵ In other words, God first gave his word to depart Egypt. He then performed a mighty act in delivering Israel from Egypt. God then gave a subsequent word explaining the significance of the act of deliverance. Through God’s word-act-word revelation,

4. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997), 140–41; John I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC 3 (Waco: Word, 1987), 179–80; Peter Enns, *Exodus*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 264; Trueman, *Creedal Imperative*, 58.

5. Geerhardus Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 3–24.

he is his own interpreter. This same pattern unfolds in the celebration of the Passover. God instructs Israel to perform the Passover. The Israelites perform the act and reflect upon God's word and deliverance. Parents then explain the significance of the Passover to their children with a subsequent word. The revelation-reflection-repetition pattern appears in Jewish halakah, the laws derived from the written and oral forms of the Torah and that extend into the Hellenistic traditions and rituals in Talmudic form.⁶ In short, God instructed the Israelites to pass the knowledge and significance of his word-act-word revelation down to future generations. This is a divinely commanded *traditio*. The word *traditio* is derived from the Latin term *trado* (to hand over); hence, a *traditio*—or “tradition”—is a teaching, doctrine, or saying handed down from generation to generation.⁷

Hear O Israel (Deut. 6:4–6)

Many are familiar with the first and greatest commandment, otherwise known as Israel's Shema: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart” (Deut. 6:4–6). But what might not immediately strike the reader is that this is a confession of Israel's faith for every individual and ultimately the entire nation. The Shema is Israel's fundamental dogma, her magna carta.⁸ To preserve Israel's faith, God bound covenant, confession, and catechesis together in the Shema.⁹ At the heart of the covenant lies Israel's chief confession of faith, which consists of four words in the Hebrew text: יהוה אלהינו

6. Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1974), 207.

7. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), s.v. *traditio*; see also Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), s.v. *traditio*.

8. Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 169; Daniel I. Block, *How I Love Your Torah, O Lord! Studies in the Book of Deuteronomy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 32.

9. J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1974), 121.

אֱחָד | יְהוָה (“The LORD our God, the LORD is one,” Deut. 6:4). Pious Jews recited this confession as a daily prayer, along with Deuteronomy 11:18–32 and Numbers 15:37–41. These references direct the Israelites to bind God’s laws on their foreheads, which they took literally and thus tied phylacteries to their heads (i.e., small leather pouches containing miniscule scrolls inscribed with God’s commands).¹⁰ The command to bind God’s law on their hands, foreheads, doorposts, and gates (Deut. 6:8) was an exhortation to meditate on and to memorize God’s law, not to tie leather pouches to their foreheads (see Prov. 6:20–22).¹¹ Nevertheless, the point of the confession was to cement Israel’s collective conviction that Yahweh was to be the sole object of their adoration, affection, and allegiance. Israel’s external profession of this brief confession was supposed to serve as the sign of the internal disposition of the heart—the outward confession mirroring the inward conviction. There was no place for prevarication; a disjunction between confession and conviction was inconceivable.¹²

God wanted Israel to profess their faith, and he wanted their profession to protect theological orthodoxy, to express love for God, and to ground catechesis. Israel’s confession was a theological guardrail to keep them on the road of biblical monotheism.¹³ The confession reminded Israel to be devoted exclusively to Yahweh—confessional and theological orthodoxy going hand in hand with orthopraxy. One cannot take the confession of the Shema on one’s lips and then bow down and worship an idol. At the same time, God intended that love would mark this confessional orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Confession of the one true living God was not supposed to spring from legalism, from duty, but rather from love for him. Israel’s love for God was to be holistic and total, which Deuteronomy 6:5 captures with the injunction to “love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”¹⁴ According to Hebrew thought,

10. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, 121.

11. Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy*, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 105.

12. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, 121; J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 142.

13. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, 122.

14. This is a major theme in the book of Deuteronomy. See 4:29; 10:12; 11:13; 13:3; 26:16; 30:2, 6, 10.

the *heart* is the seat of the mind, will, and affections; the *soul* is the source of life and vitality—essentially, one’s existence. Deuteronomy 6:5 connecting heart and soul shows that the confession is meant to express whole-person devotion, and the inclusion of one’s whole “might” then emphasizes this intention. The New Testament adds another element: the mind (Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27).¹⁵ This love for God, therefore, is not to be merely affective; it is also to consist of obedience and use of the intellect.

As with the divine instructions regarding Passover, God commands Israel to use this confession for catechesis: “And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deut. 6:6–9). Individual Israelites would internalize the significance of this confession through meditation and study. But this internal reflection on the confession would ideally lead to catechesis: instruction of one’s family.¹⁶ God intends confession and catechesis to permeate every sphere of life, which is evident in the placement of the Shema (it serves as a springboard to chapters 12–26).¹⁷ Covenant, love, obedience, and catechesis are all enshrined in confession in this well-known passage from the Old Testament. This confession is a guardian, or a plumb line, to ensure Israel’s fidelity to its covenant Lord.¹⁸

Trustworthy Sayings (1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:7–9; 2 Tim. 2:11–13; Titus 3:4–8)

The foregoing confessional and catechetical instruction lies at the foundation of Israel’s theology; therefore, it should not surprise us

15. See Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, 122; McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 142; Miller, *Deuteronomy*, 102–3.

16. See Deut. 4:9; 6:20–25; 11:19.

17. Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, 170; Miller, *Deuteronomy*, 97.

18. William L. Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” *CBQ* 25, no. 1 (1963): 77–87; Miller, *Deuteronomy*, 98.

to find the same pattern in the New Testament. This pattern appears prominently in Paul's Pastoral Epistles and his five trustworthy sayings (πιστὸς ὁ λόγος).¹⁹ What does the apostle intend to convey by this lexeme, and what are its origins? The most plausible idea is that these are objective restatements of what Jesus taught about himself, as recorded in the Gospels, and also reiterations of other biblical teachings. That is, they repeat phrases and concepts that appear in the Gospels or in other portions of Scripture.²⁰ Paul often employs earlier catechetical or liturgical material.²¹ The formula itself, "this is a trustworthy saying," echoes the commendation following the Shema.²² In other words, Paul uses the same catechetical and covenantal pattern established in the Passover and the Shema.

In the first of Paul's statements, he writes, "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (1 Tim. 1:15). This idea is prominent in all four of the Gospels.²³ Paul makes this brief objective statement based on Christ's self-testimony to demonstrate that the Savior's teaching has come to fruition in his own life and in the lives of all those who respond to Christ in faith.²⁴ Here Paul reiterates divine revelation in his letters—restating Christ's teaching for the purpose of instructing the church. In this particular case, Paul reiterates Christ's teaching under the superintendence and inspiration of the Holy Spirit (though we will see that Paul records an uninspired version of this practice when he addresses the church's doctrinal reflections on revelation in his letters). The other instances

19. For an overview of the origins and use of the formula, see I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 1999), 326–30; George W. Knight III, *The Faithful Sayings in the Pastoral Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979); R. Alastair Campbell, "Identifying the Faithful Sayings in the Pastoral Epistles," *JSNT* 16, no. 54 (October 1994): 73–86; José M. Bover, "Fidelis Sermo," *Biblica* 19, no. 11 (1938): 74–79; W. A. Oldfather and L. W. Daly, "A Quotation from Menander in the Pastoral Epistles?" *Classical Philology* 38, no. 3 (1943): 202–4.

20. George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 101–2.

21. Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 328.

22. J. N. D. Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles*, BNTC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 54.

23. See Matt. 9:13; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:32; 19:10; John 12:46–47; 16:28; 18:37.

24. Knight, *Pastoral Letters*, 101–2.

of Paul's "trustworthy saying" formula reveal the range of topics that fall under this scriptural rubric.

In the second saying, Paul writes, "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task" (1 Tim. 3:1). Why would he identify this statement about aspiring to the office of overseer as a trustworthy saying? Paul was generally concerned to establish order in the churches that he pastored. This is why Paul, for example, left Titus in Crete: so that he "might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town" (Titus 1:5). In this case, Paul's trustworthy saying reflects the apostles' lively and deep interest in church order, demonstrated in 1 Timothy 3 and other places in the New Testament.²⁵ This New Testament ecclesiastical order reflects Old Testament Israel's interest in the same topic (e.g., Exod. 18:13–27). Beyond the scope of church order, the other reason Paul commends this statement is that the desire to serve as an overseer is "noble" (καλοῦ ἔργου)—literally, "a good work."²⁶

The third occurrence of the trustworthy saying formula follows Paul's statement about the importance of training in godliness: "Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance" (1 Tim. 4:7–9). This particular testimony finds precedent in Christ's teaching in Luke 18:29–30: "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life." First Timothy 4:8b echoes Christ's words recorded in the Gospel that there is great reward for those who renounce everything for his sake. The early church took this dominical teaching, generalized it, and produced a trustworthy saying about godliness.²⁷

25. Knight, *Pastoral Letters*, 153; Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles*, 72–73; cf. Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Deutero-Pauline Letters* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 117. See Acts 6:1–6; 14:21–23; 20:17–35; Rom. 12:6–8; 1 Cor. 12:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Thess. 5:12–22; 1 Tim. 5:17–23; Titus 1:5–9; Heb. 12:7; 1 Pet. 5:1–4.

26. Knight, *Pastoral Letters*, 154–55.

27. Knight, *Pastoral Letters*, 201.

The fourth trustworthy saying appears in 2 Timothy 2:11–13, where Paul writes:

The saying is trustworthy, for:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
if we endure, we will also reign with him;
if we deny him, he also will deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—

for he cannot deny himself.

This trustworthy saying finds its conceptual roots in Christ’s teaching: “You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matt. 10:22).²⁸ But beyond Christ’s teaching, the other source of the saying might be the church at Rome and their reflection on Paul’s letter to them, specifically the sixth chapter: “Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him” (Rom. 6:8). In other words, Paul draws from the church’s reflection on his teaching—that is, he draws from church tradition.²⁹ This does not mean that Paul recognizes the authority of church tradition as having precedence over Scripture; rather, it means he recognizes that the church can accurately proclaim again the truth of authoritative revelation in its own words. In short, the one who professes faith in Christ is in union with him and shares in his sufferings in the Christian life. But through these sufferings Paul exhorts Timothy to persevere and assures him of Christ’s faithfulness to the redeemed.³⁰

The fifth trustworthy saying appears in Titus 3:4–8, where Paul reflects on the free nature of redemption:

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and

28. Knight, *Pastoral Letters*, 404–5. See also Matt. 24:13; Mark 13:13.

29. Malina and Pilch, *Deutero-Pauline Letters*, 151; Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles*, 179; Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 739.

30. Knight, *Pastoral Letters*, 407–8.

renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. (Titus 3:4–8)

Commentators suggest that this trustworthy saying was likely a terse creedal-liturgical statement that would have been used in a baptismal setting, or perhaps it was part of a baptismal hymn.³¹ The fact that the saying is trinitarian—like the baptismal formula of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–19)—points in this direction.³² By describing verses 4–7 as a trustworthy saying, Paul “certifies that he has faithfully handed down the tradition he received.”³³ But Paul, importantly, identifies the saying about the redemptive work of the triune God as an impelling factor in the pursuit of good works: “The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that [ἵνα] those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works” (Titus 3:8). The result clause indicates that the trustworthy saying and the truth it contains motivate believers to do good works.

These five trustworthy sayings cover a range of topics, including redemption, church order, and ethical conduct. But the fundamental principle that underlies them all is that the church appropriated scriptural revelation, restated it in its own terms, and promulgated it within the church. In these five instances, under divine inspiration, Paul incorporated these digested forms of revelation into his own letters, thereby confirming the sayings’ veracity and consonance with earlier revelation. With the closing of the canon and the cessation of new revelation, the revelation-reflection-repetition loop no longer exists. Nevertheless, the fact that the revelation-confession pattern has precedents both in the Old Testament and in the New confirms that, with appropriate scriptural safeguards, there is biblical warrant for the church to create and maintain confessions of faith.

31. Malina and Pilch, *Deutero-Pauline Letters*, 89.

32. Knight, *Pastoral Letters*, 350.

33. Malina and Pilch, *Deutero-Pauline Letters*, 90.

The Faith Once Delivered (Jude 3)

One of the chief concerns of Jude’s epistle is to address and refute false teachers. Jude writes, “For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (Jude 4). In contrast to the false teachers—who pervert the grace of God and thus, ultimately, God’s teaching contained in divine revelation—Jude exhorts his recipients to “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Jude seeks to distinguish orthodoxy from heterodoxy, and so he refers to “the faith”—that is, the content of what the church is supposed to believe. In other words, he refers to *fides quae creditur* (the faith that is believed), the content of faith, rather than to *fides qua creditur* (the faith by which [it] is believed), that is, the faith of the believer.³⁴ This idea is common in the New Testament, such as when Paul states, “They only were hearing it said, ‘He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy’” (Gal. 1:23). “The faith” is another way to refer to the message of the gospel.³⁵ This means that Paul and Jude believe there is an objective message to which the church needs to adhere, a faith that is different from the body of opinions promoted by the false teachers.

Jude writes to his recipients that God has delivered this faith, an objective body of knowledge, to the saints (i.e., to the church). As with the Passover liturgy, through which parents instruct their children and hand over the knowledge of God’s saving work from generation to generation, God has “handed over” (παραδοθείση) the faith to the saints. This is, in fact, how theologians translated this term from Greek into Latin: “*Pro fide quae semel tradita est sanctis*” (The faith that was once delivered to the saints).³⁶ This faith was not discovered by the saints; it was given to them by

34. Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, WBC 50 (Waco: Word, 1983), 32; Muller, *Dictionary*, s.vv. *fides qua creditur*, *fides quae creditur*.

35. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 32.

36. Herman Witsius, *Meletemata Leidensia: Quibus Continentur Praelectiones de Vita et Rebus Gestis Pauli Apostoli. Nec Non Dissertationum Exegeticarum Duodecas. Denique Commentarius in Epistolam Judae Apostoli* (Leiden, 1703), 463.

God.³⁷ The chain of communication goes from God to the apostles and then, finally, to the saints (τοῖς ἁγίοις). With talk of the faith being “delivered” or “handed over” (παραδοθείση), Jude echoes the Jewish tradition (παράδωσις) terminology, which encapsulates the practice of the transmission of an authoritative tradition.³⁸ This revelatory tradition is fixed and unchanging, as is evident by Jude’s use of the phrase “once for all” (ἅπαξ).³⁹ The fact that he contrasts the objective faith once delivered to the saints with the erroneous doctrine and ethics of the false teachers indicates that Jude upholds the connection between orthodoxy and orthopraxy, between doctrine and ethics. His concern is that the saints adhere to the common, objective faith and salvation (κοινῆς ἡμῶν σωτηρίας) handed down to them and to ensure that their ethical conduct does not go astray.⁴⁰ Jude presents the idea that the Scriptures contain a deposit of truth that the church has to pass down and guard from generation to generation.⁴¹ In Jude’s words, the church is supposed to “contend for the faith once delivered.”

Analysis

The foregoing eight passages from the Old and New Testaments demonstrate how integral confession and catechism are to the covenant people of God. The Bible itself provides confessions of faith, such as the Shema, and commands the people of God to embrace them and to inculcate children and converts with their teachings through catechesis, thereby growing the covenant community. Such an ethos does not rest on the mere repetition of biblical formulae but

37. Thomas Manton, *A Practical Commentary, or An Exposition with Notes on the Epistle of Jude* (London, 1658), 143, 146–47.

38. See Col. 2:6–8; 2 Thess. 3:6. Also note the similar idea in 2 Cor. 11:3–4; Gal. 1:8–9.

39. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 33–34; Oscar Cullman, *The Early Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 59–99, esp. 63; Manton, *Jude*, 154–55.

40. See David Dickson, *An Exposition of All of St. Paul’s Epistles Together with An Explanation of Those Other Epistles of the Apostles, St. James, Peter, John & Jude* (London, 1659), 320; Manton, *Jude*, 137–43; Witsius, *Meletemata Leidensia*, 462. Cf. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 34.

41. Manton, *Jude*, 152–53.

requires explanation and interpretation. Regarding this expansive reiteration of biblical teaching, we should note three things: (1) the biblical warrant for, and necessity of, confessions and catechesis; (2) the biblical protections against dead traditionalism; and (3) the relationship between confession and piety.

1. The Biblical Warrant for, and Necessity of, Confessions and Catechesis

Biblical confessions run in two directions. They look back at God's past redemptive activity and revelation, erecting ebenezers to remind the church of what he has done. And they lean forward into the future, as parents are to educate their children in the meaning of the Passover, and as Paul draws Timothy's attention to trustworthy sayings that, while having originated in the past, are yet supposed to echo into the future in the lives of those who embrace them. As the saints to whom Jude writes recall the faith once delivered, they are supposed to preserve it for the present and the future. The traditions that the biblical authors passed on to future generations were the living faith of the dead, not traditionalism's dead faith of the living.⁴² In the words of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), "What you have as heritage, Take now as task; For thus you will make it your own."⁴³ In other words, each generation receives the confessional tradition through catechesis and appropriates it for themselves. One cannot give away what one does not own; thus, each generation must own the truths that the confessions of the Scriptures teach.

But in the appropriation of biblical truth, one must distinguish between the inspired and inerrant teaching of Scripture and its subsequent, uninspired explanations and interpretations. God explains the significance of the Passover and tells parents what to say to their children about it (Exod. 13:14–16). But surely the children's questions will go beyond the divinely given catechetical answer, which

42. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 43.

43. As quoted in Pelikan, *Vindication of Tradition*, 82; see also in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), lines 683–89, pp. 114–15.

means that parents will have to interpret the event and its divinely revealed explanation to provide relevant answers. This pattern unfolds in Paul's "trustworthy sayings." These sayings have no direct precedent. They are not quotations from earlier revelation but summary restatements of biblical truths. These sayings show that the church, from the very beginning, has reflected on biblical revelation, interpreted it, and restated it in its own words. These particular sayings were so consonant with biblical revelation that the apostle Paul incorporated them into his divinely inspired letters to Timothy and Titus. Nevertheless, the existence of the trustworthy sayings proves that there is a legitimate place for a scripturally subordinated confessional tradition.

This conclusion should not surprise us. It follows the same well-worn path as several other ecclesiastical practices, such as prayer and preaching. God does not restrict the saints solely to repeating the words of Scripture in their prayers. To be sure, Christ provides a model prayer (Matt. 6:9–13), but it serves as a guide, not as a prescription. When Christians pray, their words must conform to the teaching of Scripture. But life, circumstance, and desire typically—and appropriately—shape the content of prayer. The same pattern appears in preaching. God does not tell preachers merely to open the Bible, read it, and then close it. That would not be preaching; it would be reading the Word—which is certainly a necessary part of worship, but it is not the only part. Preachers are supposed to read the Word, reflect on it, interpret it, and demonstrate how it relates to the life of the church. The book of Nehemiah captures this practice: "They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading" (Neh. 8:8).

In the same vein, then, the Scriptures instruct the church to take the Bible's teaching and to study, comprehend, and proclaim it again in their own words for both catechesis and defense of the faith. The existence of the "trustworthy sayings" demonstrates that the apostolic church was doing this very thing and that their confessions existed in oracular form. That Paul documented these maxims also shows that the church can and should record in writing their own trustworthy sayings. They serve both to catechize the church and to defend it against the deception of false teachers. For this task, Christ has given

the church the gift of teachers. As Thomas Manton (1620–77) observes, Christ has given “*Prophets and Apostles to the Church to write Scripture, hath also given Pastors and Teachers to open and apply Scripture, that so still it might be delivered to the Saints, and also to vindicate the doctrine of it when opposed.*”⁴⁴ In every age, light arises to oppose darkness; every time false teachers try to introduce the poison of false doctrine, Christ sends good teachers with an antidote. Athanasius (ca. 296–373), for example, opposed Arius (ca. 250–ca. 336), Augustine (354–430) combatted Pelagius (d. ca. 418), Martin Luther (1483–1546) stood against Rome, and J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937) fought against modernism. The church has never lacked good teachers. Manton encourages his readers: “Look as in War, as the *Arts of Battery* and *methods of destruction* do increase, so also doth skill in *Fortification*; and in the Church God still bestoweth gifts for the further explication of Truth.”⁴⁵

Historic confessions are one way that the church can consult the wisdom of its luminaries from the past and benefit from Christ’s gifts to the church throughout the ages. In short, the Bible mandates the creation and promulgation of a biblically subordinated tradition for the edification of the church and the defense of the faith.

2. *The Biblical Protections against Dead Traditionalism*

But just because the Bible enjoins confessionalism for the well-being of the church does not mean that there are no potential dangers. Confessions embody tradition—they enshrine and hand down what the church at a particular point in history believes and professes. The Bible, therefore, commends the creation of a biblically subordinated tradition; at the same time, the danger of severing tradition from the Bible always lies close at hand. For example, Christ and his disciples ran up against the “tradition of the elders,” which was given precedence over the commandments of God (Matt. 15:2–3). For the sake of the preservation of their tradition, the religious leaders nullified the law of God (Matt. 15:6). To be sure, Paul inveighs against “human traditions,” those that seek to displace the Word

44. Manton, *Jude*, 150.

45. Manton, *Jude*, 150.

of God (Gal. 1:14; Col. 2:8). But he commends biblically faithful traditions. He exhorts the Corinthians to maintain the traditions he gave to them (1 Cor. 11:2). Likewise, speaking to the Thessalonians, he says, “Stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter” (2 Thess. 2:15).⁴⁶ Confessional abuse does not negate the necessity of creating and maintaining a doctrinal tradition through confessions. One must always subordinate the church’s confessions to the Scriptures. The Bereans went to Scripture to verify Paul’s teaching, to ensure his fidelity to divine revelation (Acts 17:11). And Paul, famously, opposed Peter when Peter transgressed the boundaries of orthodoxy (Gal. 2:11). But just because the church might fall into error does not negate the importance and necessity of creating and preserving doctrinal tradition through confessions.

3. The Relationship between Confession and Piety

One of the common criticisms of confessionalism is that it produces a dry and dusty orthodoxy devoid of piety. But the Bible shows that, ideally, there is supposed to be an irrefragable connection between confession and piety. Biblically faithful confessions are part of a vibrant corporate and individual faith that yields the fruit of piety in practice. When God instructs the Israelites to catechize their children, it is so that future generations will continue in their faith and in their devotion to their covenant Lord. Jude exhorts his recipients to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints, the deposit of truth, to ensure that false teachers cannot secure a beachhead from which to invade the church. But Jude’s concern is not merely to preserve a body of truth for intellectual musing but to ensure that this doctrine informs the piety and practice of the church; the false teachers, recall, “pervert the grace of our God into sensuality” (Jude 4). Similarly, Paul’s trustworthy sayings address matters such as church order, and he demonstrates the link between confession and piety when he writes, “The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works” (Titus 3:8).

46. See also 2 Thess. 3:6.

But love for God is among the chief fruits of a vibrant confessionalism. Love lies at the heart of the Shema; covenant is a bond that provides the context for its participants to love one another. God showers Israel with his love, and, conversely, the Israelites are supposed to reciprocate by showing their love through obedience. Covenant and confession go hand in hand: God, in love, establishing the covenant with Israel and Israel confessing the faith once delivered to the saints, the holy tradition handed down from generation to generation. The people of God show their love as they confess the doctrines of the Bible and as those truths inform their conduct, all to the glory and love of God. The Shema is at the same time a doctrinal confession, a guardrail to keep Israel on the road of covenant fidelity, a textbook for instructing future generations, and a powerful poetic idiom with which to express heartfelt love for God. Far from a cold, rationalistic account of the faith, the Bible identifies confession as a vital ligament and cord of love connecting the church to its faithful covenant Lord. Historic confessions also inform and animate the church's worship.

Conclusion

The Bible not only expects but also arguably mandates that the people of God reflect upon and restate biblical teaching faithfully in their own words. As popular as the “no creed but the Bible” confession might be (and it is itself a confession—a brief one, but a confession nonetheless), the Bible calls the church to a deeper contemplation on the truths that it teaches. Pastors must be prepared to explain the meaning of Scripture and of the rites of the church; parents must be prepared to answer questions from their children. And all Christians must contend for the faith once delivered to the saints. In this engagement with the Bible's teachings, Christians cannot merely repeat a cento of biblical statements but must explain, interpret, and restate in their own words what the Bible means. But we theological hobbits are not the first ones to encounter the Bible. We must stand on the shoulders of giants to catch a glimpse of the glory of our triune God. That is, we must benefit from Christ's gifts to the church and glean knowledge from the *traditio*, the prayerful meditations and doctrinal

conclusions of our great ancestors in the faith. We must always check their work against the supreme authority in doctrine and life, the Holy Scriptures. Nevertheless, as we join hands with our ancestors, we can create trustworthy sayings about our common salvation and look to the horizon as we catechize future generations so that they too may contend for the faith once delivered to the saints. Far from being unbiblical, confessions of faith are employed by the Scriptures themselves and are necessary for the well-being of the church.