

~Authority of the Creeds~

"In the Protestant system, the authority of creeds, as of all human compositions, is relative and limited. It is not coordinate with, but always subordinate to, the Bible, as the only infallible rule of the Christian Faith and practice. The value of creeds depends upon the measure of their agreement with the Scriptures. **In the best case, a human creed is only an approximate and relatively correct exposition of revealed truth, and may be improved by the progressive knowledge of the Church, while the Bible remains perfect and infallible.** The Bible is of God; the Confession is man's answer to God's Word. The Bible has, therefore, a divine and **absolute** authority, the Confession only an ecclesiastical and **relative** authority. Any higher view of the authority of creeds is un-Protestant and essentially Romanist. Creedolatry is a species of idolatry, and substitutes the tyranny of a printed Pope for that of a living Pope. It is apt to produce the opposite extreme of a rejection of all creeds, and to promote rationalism and infidelity."

Philip Schaff, The Creeds of Christendom, published by Baker Book House

"All synods or councils, since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err; and **many have erred**. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both."
Westminster Confession of Faith (31:4).

You Have Made The Commandment of God of No Effect By Your Tradition

By Walt Hibbard (PreteristAD70@uReach.com)

I will have a lot to say about **the Creeds**, both in principle and through my experience in churches which hold the historic written Creeds in high regard. This is because many sincere Bible-believing Christians, when they learn a little bit about the preterist view of eschatology and become fascinated with it, invariably ask the question, "But what about the Creeds?"

When they find that there are some basic differences between what the Scriptures teach and what the historic Christian Creeds teach, they immediately turn away from the Scripture and its plain teachings in favor of the view held by the Creeds and early Church Fathers. I find this happening over and over again in various denominational circles, involving both pastors and lay people alike.

(Let me plainly say that I am NOT "anti-creed" -- I have taught the Apostles' Creed, the Westminster Shorter Catechism and **the Heidelberg Catechism** to all my children, and taught an adult Sunday school class on **the Westminster Confession** in the early 1980's)

***Now I want to cite two personal examples of how the creeds are often misused:

Back in 1984 when I served as a ruling elder in a fairly large conservative Presbyterian denomination, and AGAIN in 1997 when I was a member in good standing in a very small Reformed denomination, my views on eschatology came under heavy scrutiny by pastors and elders in these ecclesiastical groups. In both cases, the issue was raised on the basis of the full preterist view being in conflict with the historic Reformed confessions, particularly **the Westminster Confession**, as well as the ancient creeds, such as

the Apostles' Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Nicene Creed, etc.

In the 1984 encounter, since most of the elders in my church had never studied eschatology to any great extent, several professors from Reformed seminaries were called in by my session to respond to papers which I had written to set forth what I believed the Scriptures were teaching. I provided a copy of **THE PAROUSIA** by James Stuart Russell for each of the professors, asking them to at least scan it before coming to the meeting. One professor promptly announced that he had no intention of reading the Russell book. The others apparently didn't read it either, but avoided the blunt expression of the first gentleman. Two of these professors still held to the easily refuted definition of "generation" (Gk. genea) in **Mt. 24:34 as meaning "race."** I reminded them that the same Greek word is used twenty-eight other times in the synoptic Gospels where it undisputedly means those people living at the same time, not successive generations of Jews living throughout history. (One other professor did agree with me on that point.) A third professor maintained that the promise made by Jesus in Mt. 26:64 was to be understood in terms of a future fulfillment to someone "covenantally related" to the high priest Caiaphas. This professor apparently lost sight of the fact that Jesus was speaking directly to Caiaphas, himself, with the words "hereafter YOU will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven." (NKJV) Sometime later this same professor suggested that my understanding of the Scriptures had "become clouded" by the death of my wife, not long before this, and that I would likely soon be starting a new cult which taught the full preterist view. My own pastor suggested that (quote) "Walt believes that he has found a flaw in the Westminster Standards," (unquote) and followed this up with the comment that (quote) "this whole preterist thing is simply incredible that Walt could believe it."

While the Holy Scriptures were certainly studied in this encounter, it became clear that violating the Confession was the major issue in this so-called "**heresy trial.**" At this point, I was asked to recant of my theological error, and get on with the work of the church. Sadly, under extreme pressure from fellow elders, pastors, and seminary professors, I temporarily let go of the full preterist view, opting for a modified preterist view, signed a statement that I agreed with the **Westminster Confession of Faith** and its futurist understanding of the Second Advent, etc. and have repented of this action before the Lord ever since! Why did this recantation bother me so much? Simply because I could not live with myself holding the inconsistencies of partial preterism, yet knowing full well the covenantal and completed salvation as taught in the Scriptures and which was embraced in the full preterist position. It was not long after that time that I returned to the full preterist view which I have strongly stood for ever since.

If you ever find yourself in my boots, being pressured to recant on the full preterist view because of the creeds, **DON'T DO IT! DON'T DO IT!**

Again, in 1997 when I was a member of a church in a very small Reformed denomination, the pointed investigation of my eschatological views took on a rather different slant in a way that greatly surprised me. Instead of the Scriptures being the main focal point in this discussion, it was the Church Creeds and the writings of the early Church Fathers. My senior pastor stated his position clearly, (quote) "When the Creed is challenged, you are trying to change the very foundation that every other generation built upon." (unquote)

He charged that I was trying to re-invent Christianity!! Both the senior and the associate pastors believed that the early Creeds emanated from the "oral tradition" and only much later were the individual apostolic writings gathered together to form what we have today, namely, the Canon of Scripture, which has become our Bible. According to this view, which books of the Bible were inspired by the Holy Spirit was dependent upon the early Fathers remembering what the "oral tradition" consisted of.

The senior pastor warned me (quote) “don’t think the early Church studied the Bible and came up with the creedal faith; rather they used this common faith in piecing the Bible together. If a book was not sufficiently quoted by the Church Fathers, it was not included in the Canon.”(unquote) And therefore he would have me believe that there could be no significant difference between the teachings of the Bible and the Creeds since both were supported by the ancient oral tradition. The earliest Creeds, i.e., the Apostles’ Creed, the Athanasias Creed, the Nicene Creed were elevated to a high ecclesiastical stature, and while they were always distinguished from the Scriptures, they nevertheless were held in the highest esteem and carried great authority. The senior pastor also stated:

(quote) “The Church has handed down to us what they believed to be the Word of God and what they believed to be the definitive interpretation of that Word in its essentials received directly from the Apostles.” (unquote) This view on how we got both our Bible and the Creeds, I discovered, was taken from Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic teaching, enabling both pastors to make the statement that it was (quote) “the Church which gave us the Bible.” (unquote)

Manifestly, if this is true then it becomes clear that Church authority transcends God’s inspired and inerrant Word. Protestants have always maintained that it was God Himself Who gave the Church the Bible, as “holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.” (I Pet. 1:21 NKJV)

Next, a meeting in my home was called to further consider these matters. As the investigation that evening in 1997 began, the senior pastor announced that the discussion would be limited to the Creeds and early Church Fathers. He ruled out any references to the Holy Scriptures during that meeting. I could not believe what I was hearing! I had come to the meeting prepared to exegete the imminency passages which supported the full preterist view, and I was being denied an appeal to the only inspired writings, the Bible. It was the Creeds and the Confessions, esp. the Creeds, that would be used to determine whether my views were orthodox or not. With the consideration of the Scriptures prohibited, there was no doubt which direction the investigation would take!

Taking his prompting from other pastors in our denominational headquarters, the senior pastor demanded that I answer with a simple “Yes or No” to five basic eschatological questions. Immediately I suspected a trap! I refused to respond in that simplistic manner. The temperature in the room began to rise rapidly and tempers began to flair! At that point the associate pastor protested against the senior pastor’s demand for a “Yes or No” answer and called for a recess. Soon afterwards the meeting broke up. But that was not the end by any means!

Only four days later the senior pastor called a church congregational meeting and RESIGNED. With no warning whatsoever, he announced that he and his family would begin attending the local Greek Orthodox Church the following Sunday.

Our congregation was flabbergasted! It later became known that the full preterist thing caused him to re-examine Christianity from the roots up. He said that my full preterist view did not cause him to turn Orthodox (since he had been studying Eastern Orthodoxy for the past 10 or more years); rather it merely hastened what would have happened within a year anyway, after he had gotten our church squarely into a conservative Episcopal denomination. He also admitted that the reason the whole thing got speeded up and the resignation took place so abruptly was that his position as pastor in our small Reformed denomination would have forced him to press charges against me (which he could not bring himself to do since he respected me as a ‘father’) and that if he did bring charges against me, he would FIRST have to bring charges against HIMSELF, since he admitted that he had strayed farther from the Reformed faith than I had!! Wow! Do you get the picture? Here is a pastor in a small Reformed denomination trying to

move his congregation into a conservative Episcopal denomination within the next year, while at the same time planning to take himself and his family into the Eastern Orthodox Church!

A tragic turn of events! This action surprised and disappointed the assistant pastor, yet his own views on the Creeds and Confessions were almost identical to those of the senior pastor. Observers later mentioned that from the discussions on the Internet, the associate pastor would have been more likely to go Eastern Orthodox than the senior pastor.

The associate pastor earlier had told me that I was not ALLOWED to interpret the Scriptures in a manner different from what was taught in the early Creeds. The senior pastor wholeheartedly agreed. Therefore, there remained no question as to which authority took the higher position. I suddenly found myself to be a member of a church which placed the Creeds above the Bible, God's inspired Word. Although both men tried to deny this, it was clear and obvious. It was not long after this that I resigned from this small Reformed church and united with a somewhat larger Presbyterian denomination where the place of the Creeds and Confessions was recognized as only secondary standards, with the inspired, inerrant Holy Scriptures as the supreme and final authority.

Why did I go into all this detail? Simply this: I sincerely believe that in many Protestant circles today, the Creeds and Confessions have come to be elevated to a position where they stand above the Holy Scriptures in practical authority. Don't bother to exegete the Scriptures (they seem to be saying), just go to the Confession or the Creed.

As Philip Schaff said, (quote) "In the Protestant system, the authority of (creeds), as of all human compositions, is relative and limited. It is not coordinate with, but always subordinate to, the Bible, as the only infallible rule of the Christian Faith and practice. The value of creeds depends upon the measure of their agreement with the Scriptures. In the best case, a human creed is only an approximate and relatively correct exposition of revealed truth, and may be improved by the progressive knowledge of the Church, while the Bible remains perfect and infallible. The Bible is of God; the Confession is man's answer to God's Word. The Bible has, therefore, a divine and absolute (authority), the Confession only an ecclesiastical and relative authority. Any higher view of the authority of (creeds) is un-Protestant and essentially Romanist. (**Creedolatry**) is a species of idolatry, and substitutes the tyranny of a printed book for that of a living Pope. It is apt to produce the opposite extreme of a rejection of all creeds, and to promote rationalism and infidelity." (unquote) -**Philip Schaff**, *The Creeds of Christendom*, published by Baker Book House

We can add a hearty "Amen" to these statements of Philip Schaff.

The current editor of *Credenda Agenda*, Douglas Wilson, shows us what can happen when the "exalted tradition" folks have their way. (Quote) "The traditions of men are frankly acclaimed as the requirements of God. This may be held with doctrinal consistency, as the Roman Catholics do, or furtively, as inconsistent 'strict subscriptionists' within the Reformed tradition do.

This is the 'tradition as monarch' school. The theory may mouth a high view of Scripture. But practically, whenever the traditions, creeds, and practices of a church cannot be brought before the bar of Scripture, then that tradition has assumed the place of Scripture. Now the church does have authority to point to the Word of God as the Word of God. But it has no authority to lie and elevate the word of man to the same position."(Unquote)

Wilson goes on to state the biblical position in the relation between Scripture and tradition. (Quote) "The

Protestant doctrine of sola Scriptura does not mean that Scripture is the only religious authority in the lives of Christians. Rather, sola Scriptura means that Scripture exhibits two characteristics which define its unique place in the rule of the church. The Bible, and only the Bible, is the ultimate authority in the teaching of the church, and the Bible, and only the Bible, is the only inerrant authority in the teaching and practice of the church. These two elements --ultimacy and inerrancy--are unique to Scripture.” (Unquote)

Wilson concludes that (quote) “a fallible authority is not defined as one that is wrong all the time. This is a good thing, as it turns out, for it is the fallible teaching authority of the historic Church which pointed us to the canon of Scripture.... Just as John the Baptist, a sinful man, pointed to Christ, the sinless One, so the Church, a fallible authority, has accurately pointed to the infallible and ultimate canon of Scripture.... The only tradition which gives that place of honor to sola Scriptura is that of the historic Protestant faith.” (unquote) -Douglas Wilson, *Credenda Agenda*, Vol. 8, No. 5"