AJG notes from Carl Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Crossway, 2012)

Introduction

Some pastors like to say "We have no creed but the Bible." However, every church has a creed, a summary view of what the Bible taught on grace, eschatology and ecclesiology. In such a church, however, it has never been written down and set it out in public. This is a serious problem.

The burden of this book: creeds and confessions are vital to the present and future well-being of the church. For Trueman (as a professor at a confessional Presbyterian seminary and minister in a confessional Presbyterian denomination) to be "confessional" 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." (p14)

"In sum, I not only believe that creeds and confessions are good for the church, I am also committed by vow to uphold the teaching of a particular confession… I am committed to the notion at a deep, personal level." (p15)

Such a view is at odds with the vast majority of evangelical Christians today. We live in an anticonfessional age, which is closely connected to the rejection of tradition.

"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… and crucially and ironically, not, therefore subject to testing by Scripture to see whether they are true." (p16)

However, it is very misleading to claim that Protestants have the Bible rather than tradition. (E.g. we make use of particular manuscript traditions that lie behind different translations; we use lexicons, commentaries and books of theology; we use words like "Trinity.") "In fact, *tradition* is not the issue; it is how one defines that tradition, and how one understands the way it connects to Scripture, which are really the points at issue." (p17)

Thoughtful Protestants "have understood the Reformers as arguing for we might call a tradition that is *normed* by Scripture." (p18) The same is true of creeds and confessions specifically which "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.*(p18)

Book outline:

- Ch1 = why the case for confessionalism can be difficult to make at the present time
- Ch2 = how the Bible itself seems to teach the need for creeds
- Ch3 = the implications of Trinitarian and Christological truth (re: Nicaea and Chalcedon), notably (i) doctrinal complexity and inter-relatedness, and (ii) the importance of the church.
- Ch4 = Major Protestant confessional standards
- Ch5 = the doxological origins and function of creeds/confessions in the life of the church
- Ch6 = the usefulness of confessions
- Conclusion & Appendix = on the tricky question of revising confessions

Chapter 1 – The cultural case against creeds and confessions

Reasons why creeds/confessions are regarded with such suspicion these days…

Three assumptions…

… that must be true if the case for church-health needing creeds/confessions is be sound:

1. "The past is important, and has things of positive relevance to teach us."
2. "Language must be an appropriate vehicle to the stable transmission of truth across time and geographical space."
3. "There must be a body or an institution that can authoritatively compose and enforce creeds and confessions." They are not private documents, but are adopted by the church as public declarations of her faith. This assumes that institutions and authority are not necessarily bad or evil. (p23)

However, the past is often a source of embarrassment, language is similarly suspect (in a world of spin, deception, etc), and institutions are all thought to be bullying and self-perpetuating. To advocate creeds/confessions is deeply counter cultural.

We need to know our enemy. And how it is that "in our defence 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." (p24)

Devaluing the past

Science has a "built-in narrative of progress", whereby things are getting better and the past is inferior to the present. Together with concepts like evolution there has arisen "a gravitational pull within the culture toward the future, built on the inferiority of the past" and the uniqueness of scientific knowledge. (p25)

Technology has seen a reversal in the flow of knowledge. Previously, the old passed knowledge (about trades, etc) down to the young. Now, however, rapid technological change favours the young and makes the old dependent. Taken with other factors this plays its role in the bias against age. (p27)

Consumerism is "an over-attachment to material goods and possessions such that one's meaning or worth is determined by them" AND it is 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."

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 reinforces negative attitudes toward the past. (p27) This is reinforced by factors such as the built-in obsolescence of objects and bias towards the young (in aesthetics, marketing, and even the "wisdom" which is invested in young people by virtue of their young – e.g. Lady Gaga lectures the world about apartheid and gay marriage and we listen).

"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." (p29)

The disappearance of "human nature". The "idea of a human nature or 'essence' that connects people in one time and place to another is today often neglected or ignored." Why? We are now far more aware of the diversity of social and cultural practices of different groups, and are prompted to ask: are there universal human values? Is there a common core that binds human beings together? If not, what authority can be placed in any human document that belongs to a different time and place?

Words, Mysticism, and Pragmatism

We are suspicious of words as reliable means of communication. And they can be problematic: words can be used to maintain power and prestige (e.g. how the Nazis developed the idea of "being without life" – i.e. you can be alive yet not a human being, thus paving the way for extermination). And this suspicion has

"bled over into the church" in the idea that "Christianity is a way of life and not a set of propositions." This has become a mantra among younger Christians in the last 10-15 years. (p32)

On the one hand, the concern to stop Christianity terminating in mere intellectualism is valid. But, popular mysticism that devalues objective truth is not (e.g. "It feels good. How can it be wrong?"). Where the Reformers put preaching and pulpit central, recent decades have seen churches shift preaching from its central place – replacing it with drama, candles, incense, small group discussion, dialogue. Under it all is a "suspicion that proclaimed words are no longer a reliable authority." (p34)

The intellectual roots of this move started with Kant (and his critique of traditional epistemologies) and especially Schleiermacher who "understood doctrine not so much as statements about the nature of God as a description of religious psychology." (p35)

This theological liberalism is actually found in evangelical churches every time someone says "the Lord told me to do this" (when "this" is something silly) or when the centre of a Biblestudy is "what the text means to me."

"Closely allied to mysticism is another phenomenon lethal to confessional Christianity: pragmatism, the notion that truth is to be found in usefulness." (p35). When people say "I just know in my heart that this is true," what they are often saying is "This belief works for me." This is pervasive in modern churches: Christianity is all about what it can do for you in the here and now. Thus, it's no surprise that creeds/confessions do not appear particularly useful. Would more people come to a seminar on the Trinity or on how to have a successful marriage and fulfilled sex life? Orthodoxy "as expressed in the great creeds and confessions is not rejected; it is simply sidelined as irrelevant and essentially useless." (p37)

Antiauthoritarianism

Creeds/confessions are made by institutions (churches) and derive practical authority from their connection to such institutions. But our age rejects external authority. Or rather, it rejects *certain* forms of external authority.

We reject families, civil government, traditional moral values, etc. But listen to the pronouncements of boy bands etc. Old forms of authority have been replaced by new ones – self appointed gurus. (Though we still want our electricians and brain surgeons to have age and experience!). Ultimately we now believe that authority lies within us (that's what advertising tells us) – we know in our hearts what is true, there's no higher value than to be true to yourself, etc. ("Of course it doesn't take a genius to realise that so many of the things that we 'just know in our hearts' do actually come from external authorities – commercials, idiotic talk shows, television pundits")

"One further factor that militates against traditional notions of external institutional authority is the Internet, specifically the world of blogs and tweets… the culture of the comments thread is one which has confused the right to speak with the right to be heard… The democratisation of discussion in this way in inimical to traditional notions of authority and to the traditional nations of knowledge and expertise which underlie them." (p41). Wikipedia and the like has reinforced this, giving the impression that a subject can be mastered in a very short period of time and that extended periods of hard work and training are unnecessary.

We see antiauthoritarianism in the church, for instance, in the casual way in which people make and break membership vows.

The fear of exclusion

i.e. "the fear of exclusion, of drawing boundaries such that some people belong and other people do not" – partly as a result of human evils such as genocide etc (p44). For, 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." (p44) Theological liberalism, and post 9-11 fear of fundamentalism has reinforced this fear.

Within evangelicalism (conservative, orthodox Protestantism, with an emphasis on conversion and evangelism) this fear of exclusion has led to the prioritising of parachurch organisations – be it The Gospel Coalition, Evangelical Alliance, etc. Each, by definition, requires a broad statement of faith designed to keep in the tent all the diversity of which the organisation's leaders approve. Matters like baptism, which are vital to the constitution of actual churches, are typically left to one side so as not to exclude people.

"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 which divide denominations are trivial and even sinful in the way they keep Presbyterians and Baptists from belonging to the same church." (pp46-47)

Conclusion: creeds confessions and distasteful Christianity

There are powerful currents in modern life militating against positive use of creeds and confessions in the church. The pastor who thinks he is biblical by declaring no creed by the Bible may actually be shaped by the world around him more than he has realised.

"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 go directly against the grain of an antihistorical, antiauthoritarian age. Creeds strike hard at the cherished notion of human autonomy and of the notion that I am exceptional. (p48)

Chapter 2: the foundations of creedalism

(i) The adequacy of words

The nature of God is fundamental here – he is a God who speaks (Jn 1:1, Gen 1:1-4). His word is powerful and creative. Divine speech is a fundamental aspect of the special relationship between God and those made in his image. (See his words in Gen 1:28-30 which establish their status, duties, authority, etc). It continues after the fall. There is one particular mode of God's presence, which is by and through his word (see the "famine" of hearing God's words in Amos 8:11-12). "Words are the means God has chosen for his presence and therefore are by definition an adequate means for that presence." (p57)

This divine use of words flows over into the human use of words at a theological level. Words are how we respond to God and how we communicate with each other about God. For example, Exodus 12:26-27 commands that Passover be explained (in words) by parents to children. This "indicates both the adequacy of words for communicating important theological truth and their priority over ritual action. This is a point that is made repeatedly throughout the Bible." (p58) Also, the gospel is a message that is to be preached.

(ii) Human nature as a Universal

"What is there that binds us together – human beings from different times and places – such that there might be some point of useful contact between us?" (p61)

"'In the beginning, God' is foundational to all that follows. God is the one constant of existence; everything else is contingent upon his being and action." Second, humans are distinguished from all other creatures as being made "in his own image" and with a specific mandate from God. Third, we are distinguished as the only creatures to whom God speaks. "These aspects of human uniqueness provide a universal context for all human activity." (p62)

"If we understand human nature as fixed, as something which is not constructed by the individual or by the community but something which is given by God in his address to us, then we are on much more secure ground in moving theological statements from one time, place, or culture to another. Human nature is something which is more basic than gender, class, culture, location or time… This is not to deny that context has a huge impact upon who we are and how we think… [but] Human beings remain essentially the same in terms of their basic nature as those made in God's image and addressed by his word even as we move from place to place and from generation to generation." (p63)

"Frankly, it has become rather tedious to read some simpleton who thinks he is a genius dismissing works of theology or literature or philosophy because they were written by 'dead [or sometimes living] white males'." (p63)

Note Paul's address in 1 Corinthians 1 to the diverse groups – Jew and Gentile. Their contexts meant that they responded to the message of the Cross in very different ways. But this does "not subvert the fixed truth of the cross's universal significance and fixed meaning."

"Undergirding this is Paul's own commitment to something else that points clearly to the givenness of human nature and the solidarity of humanity: the function of Adam and of Christ. The logic of Romans 5 and of 1 Corinthians 15 depends upon corporate solidarity." (p65)

"So how does all this apply to creeds and confessions?... [They] are human attempts to summarise and express the basic elements of the Christian faith. They have been constructed throughout the ages by people from very different contexts but who are all bound together by the shared horizons of God's revelation in Christ and in the biblical text and their own common human nature as readers of that text. This is what gives creeds and confessions a quality that transcends the local conditions of their original composition and that allows us to take them seriously. Of course, it does not guarantee their truthfulness. All creedal formulations are subordinate to Scripture and subject to correction thereby…" (p65)

(iii) The church as institution

"By institution here, I mean a self-consciously organised body of people who identify with a cause (what we now call 'church membership') and who acknowledge a structure of ministerial authority." (p66)

Our culture is suspicious. But the Bible clearly lays out a structure of authority in the church, one part of its authority residing in "the handing on of truth from one generation to the next via established power structures." (p66)

Thus elders and overseers are marked by numerous qualities, one of which is the ability to teach – and not to teach anything, but a specific content which is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Doctrine and structure are thus interconnected in the person of the elder.

Basic to belonging to the church in Paul's mind (see Romans 10:9-10) are two things: a credible Christian profession involves doctrinal belief (in the resurrection of Christ) and a public statement (Jesus is Lord). This does not require massive doctrinal knowledge. But doctrine is still important to this profession, even in a minimal way. There is propositional content.

"The membership of the church is connected to doctrine and words is also clear from noting what it is that leads to one's exclusion. See Romans 16:17. Contrary to the modern idea that doctrine divides, Paul says the opposite: false teachers are to be avoided because *they* are divisive on account of their wandering away from sound doctrine." (p68)

"Given that belonging to the Christian community has a minimal doctrinal content, it is not surprising that the NT also seems to envision that church members will over time grown and deepen in their knowledge and understanding of the Christian faith." (See 1 Cor. 3:1, Heb. 6:1-2). "Thus, the bar of doctrinal knowledge is set low for initial belonging; but the expectation is that this knowledge will grow and deepen as the believer matures within the context of the Christian community." (p68)

The task of overseeing this maturing belongs to the church's elders. This is one reason for the different between qualifying for belonging to the church and for holding office in the same. (See the pastoral epistles). Paul's vision of eldership is, again, profoundly counter-cultural: it assmes someone who is competent in doctrine and in teaching, and with a proven track record in his own household, all of which assumes age and experience – the kinds of things the contemporary world holds in such disdain. To which we add a third countercultural position: "rule" – see 1 Tim. 5:17. (p70)

(iv) A form of sound words

The Gospel and the apostolic tradition is to be passed from generation to generation. This is the responsibility of Christian parents to their children. But especially that of elders in the church.

Clearly there is a fixed field of meaning which must be passed on and held to. What is this teaching to communicate? The apostle Paul (i) speaks of a "form of sound words"; and (ii) includes passages that are suggestive of creedal formulation. Important to both is 2 Timothy chapter 1.

2 Timothy 1:13 = "Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus" (ESV). The KJV speaks, more famously, of "the form of sound words". The word for form or pattern "describes a model, form, or standard that is intended to function as a trustworthy or reliable guide."

It is not adherence to the conceptual content of what has been taught, but to the *form of the words* that he has used.

After all, in any discipline a special vocabulary is necessary in order to achieve clarity, good communication, and easy identification of someone who does not have requisite competence. So too in the church (with words like Trinity, incarnation, atonement, grace, total depravity, election, justification, sanctification, etc).

Nor does Paul say to Timothy that he is simply to memorise the Scriptures (any more than he ever defines preaching as merely the reading of the same). *The form of sound words is something more.*

Thus, "to claim to have no creed but the Bible, then, is problematic: the Bible itself seems to demand that we have forms of sound words, and that is what creeds are."

Several statements in the NT seem to have a creedal sensibility. One is just a few verses previously in 2 Tim. 1:9-10 – where Paul's words form a basic statement of Christian theology (grace, Christology, gospel). Other examples include Philippians 2:5-10, 1 Tim. 3:16, 1 Tim. 1:15.

Also, we note Paul's very explicit command to pass on from generation to generation the correction teaching. He assumes that this pattern of sound words can indeed be handed on. In 2 Thess. 2:15 he speaks about "the traditions" taught by Paul's words which were to be the norm for the church. Also in 1 Cor. 11:2 and 2 Thess. 3:6. (And we see the failure

"This notion of tradition, of the need to hand on the gospel, is deeply embedded in the nature of the gospel itself. The historical particularity of the history of Israel and of Jesus Christ means that, if the gospel, the meaning and significance of these things, is not passed on from generation to generation, then it remains in a sense trapped in the past." (p78)

"This tradition is to be regulated by Scripture as the sole authoritative source of knowledge of God's actions; but *it is not formally identical with Scripture*. It uses forms of sound words, sermons, hymns, and prayers, among things, in order to pass the message from one generation to another." (p78)

Failure in doctrine – as well as in life – brings forth strong words and action from the apostle. See 1 Cor. 5 and 1 Timothy 1 (Hym. and Alexander seem to have been false teachers). See also the very clear instruction in Romans 16:17.

Conclusion:
Chapter 1 = The Bible teaches that the past is important and has things to teach us; language can transmit truth across time and geographical space; there must be a body or institution to compose and enforce creeds and confessions.

Ch 2 = Paul understands that the passing of the Christian faith involves taking history seriously, "understanding God as a God who speaks, having (and holding to) forms of sound words, and not simply reading the Bible in the Hebrew or the Greek. Theological synthesis is part of the church's task, and this is facilitated by the development of ways of speaking which are appropriate to the content expressed and the actions being performed." (p79)

Of course Scripture remains the supreme authority. It is the *norming norm.* This is what WCF 1:10 expresses, stating that its own statements are subordinate to Scripture:

> "The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture."

Chapter 3: the early church

Given what we've seen it's no surprise that creed-like formulations appear early in Christian literature. They have a doctrinal aspect – transmitting the faith. And they have an ecclesiological aspect – as they bind the church.

The *Rule of Faith*
The immediate post-apostolic period presented the challenge of the death of the apostles (e.g. in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch and in the *Didache*), plus doctrinal challenges (e.g. Docetism and Marcionism). These seems to be reasons behind the *Rule of Faith* – a simple and fairly consistent doctrinal summary touching on creation, Christ, the Spirit, the coming of the kingdom and judgement. The likes of Irenaeus and Tertullian used it as a tool to assess contemporary teaching – a functional similarity to later creeds.

The *Apostles' Creed*
Of unknown authorship, this enjoyed wide acceptance and continues to this day. So useful is it that it has been incorporated into many church liturgies and catechisms (e.g. with both the Lutheran and Heidelberg Catechisms). Its near-universal acceptance is ironic given its one controversial and disputed statement that Christ descended into hell. Probably, though, the authors didn't intend to teach anything particularly objectionable.

The Nicene Creed, Chalcedonian Definition, and Athanasian Creed
Of the 7 ecumenical church councils, only four concern the Protestant Church. The Council of Nicaea in 325, faced the Arian controversy, its work being clarified and summarised in the Council of Constantinople of 381. The result was what we call the Nicene Creed (technically the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed) – which stated the divinity of Christ and of the Spirit, and gave us the important language of "same substance" (*homoousion*).

The Council of Ephesus addressed the question of the person of Christ, and of his divine and human natures. Specifically, it rejected Nestorianism – which radically separated the divine and human natures in such a way that Christ could hardly be regarded as a person at all.

The Council of Chalcedon dealt with the immediate problem of Eutychianism – seeking to clarify the relationship between substances and person in Jesus Christ. The Chalcedonian Formula puts into place four boundaries for Christological orthodoxy: "Christ must be fully God; Christ must be fully human; the two natures must not be so mixed together that either disappears into the other or that a third hybrid nature is produced; and the two natures must not be separated so as to undermine the unity of the one person." (p100)

The Athanasian Creed is not technically an "ecumenical creed" in that it was not produced and ratified by a an ecumenical council. But it has played an important historical role. It is of western origin, originally in Latin, and certainly post-dates the Nicene Creed of 381. It states careful Trinitarian orthodoxy and a careful Christology. Its chief controversy is its two anathemas (clauses 2 and 44) which state that any person failing to keep the creed "whole and undefiled" will doubtlessly "perish everlastingly." Such anathemas fall foul of contemporary tastes, according to which exclusion is always wrong. And yet Christians cannot avoid the fact that faith is always exclusive in some sense.

Conclusion
It is striking that the early church felt the need to develop binding creedal formulas. An ancient practice is not automatically biblical or appropriate – and the early church quickly stumbled into various fomrs of error. But it's clear that the teaching and practice of Paul in the NT was followed through the early church and beyond in the use of creeds – which are simply forms of sound words allied to a church which is not a collection of random believers but a body with definite structure and leadership.

The early creeds focus on the most basic building blocks of the faith. They have obvious omissions. What they share in common is the very identity of God. That's why they have remained influential, even thoughu they don't address questions about an individual's salvation, for example.

If you abolish the early church creeds you are going to need to replace them with something. However, the more closely you acknowledge the traditions on which you actually depend for your theology, the more you can assess them in the light of Scripture.

The biblicist move is to stay as close as possible to the biblical narrative and the biblical categories (about which much is commendable). But, "depending on which strand of biblical teaching one chooses to privilege, the results could be disastrous in a number of ways. To emphasize biblical teaching on the unity of God might lead to what is essentially a modality Christology… Or an emphasis on the distinction of Father and Son, coupled with passages that speak of the Father's superiority, might lead to subordinationist christologies…" (pp106-107)

To avoid such error the pastor has to use commentaries and theological books that connect with the creeds of the early church. Rather than seeking to reinvent the wheel (and either stumble into error or end up with something identical to the old design) it is better to humble use the ancient creeds as tools which make better sense of Scripture than the alternatives.

Of course, for Protestants matters such as justification and the sacraments mean that creedalism cannot stop with Chalcedon. We turn to the confessional developments of the 16th and 17th centuries.

Chapter 4: classical Protestant confessions

These confessions had both political and theological impulses; here we are concerned only with the latter. The focus is on those which continue to exercise influence in the main Protestant denominations; it does not consider the Anabaptist or Arminian groupings which are not central to the Reformation tradition.

The Anglican Articles

Several leading European theologians spent time in England in the 1500s – e.g. Martin Bucer, Peter Martyr Vermigli, and John a Lasco. They helped influence the shape of the Church of England (not just internal English politics).

The great textual achievements of Anglicanism are the Book of Common Prayer, the 39 Articles and the Homilies. The BCP is greatest liturgical achievement in the English language, against which modern attempts seem like "wooden verbiage." (p111)

The 39 Articles, originally finalised in 1571, "represent the closest thing the Anglican Church has to a formal confession of faith." (p112). The history of their interpretation and subscription is turbulent – e.g. J. H. Newman's attempt in Tract 90 in 1841 to offer a strongly Roman Catholic interpretation. He left for Rome, "but the mere existence of Tract 90 is enough to show how problematic is the history of the interpretation of the Articles." (p112)

Also, "the need of care and caution in moving the Reformation forward and the need for a comprehensive Protestantism – meant that the Anglican articles were less sharply and elaborately articulated than many other Reformation confessions." (p113).

They make clear statements on hallmark Protestant doctrines such as justification by faith (which is reinforced in the Book of Common Prayer).

"Of course, the history of the Anglican church is, by and large, a history of failure to apply the 39 Articles and to carry forward the theology they contain." (p115)

The Book of Concord

It owes its contents substantially to the career and theology of Martin Luther. It was adopted in 1580 by a group of leading Lutheran churchmen, princes, nobles and town councils. It remains the confessional standard for global Lutheranism, but its applications vary widely – between conservative and liberal Lutheran groups.

The Book of Concord is actually a collection of different writings – including the Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, the Augsburg Confession and others.

Sacramental theology (and Luther's distinctive teaching about the Lord's Supper) was a key feature of the book – and of all theological discussions in the 16th century. Modern evangelicals find it puzzling that more ink was spent arguing over the Lord's Supper than over the nature of justification. We think it secondary and divisive. "Of course, you cannot have a church without a clear understanding of these things… Minimally, an understanding of baptism is important because baptism is the means of entry into the visible church; and an understanding of the Lord's Supper is important because, minimally, the admission to or banning from participation in the Supper is a basic part of church disciplinary procedure. Thus, churches that have membership and that exert pastoral oversight and exercise discipline must have a position on both baptism and the Lord's Supper. If a church does not have such, then, frankly, it is not really a church." (p118)

A second aspect of concern in the Lutheran confessional documents is pedagogy: "it rests upon a vision for church life whereby the people are slowly but surely educated in the great doctrines of the faith. They are not meant to stay at the level of knowledge they have when they first start to listen to sermons… rather they are to grow to maturity." (pp118-119)

The Three Forms of Unity
This is the collective name for The Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and the Canons of Dordt (1619). "The form the confession standards of Reformed churches that look to the continental Reformation (as opposed to the Anglo-Scottish Reformation) for their origins." (p120)

The Belgic Confession was the work of a single man, French Protestant martyr Guido de Bres. He wrote to seek toleration for Reformed believers in the Low Countries. The Confession was adopted by the Synod of Dordt as a Standard.

The Heidelberg Catechism was probably the work of a single man, Zacharias Ursinas of Heidelberg. The Catechism is remarkable for its pastoral tone (note the use of the first person in the answers – "I") and for the fact that it pointedly omits direct teaching on predestination.

The Synod of Dordt produced the Canons that bear its name. It addressed the problems caused by the rising Arminian movement, and were specifically a direct response to Arminian Remonstrance of 1610. The Canons became the basis for what is much later known as the Five Points of Calvinism (often referred to by the acronym TULIP). "The Canons were thus not intended as anything approaching a comprehensive statement of Christian doctrine and cannot by themselves form an adequate confessional basis for a church. But, combined with the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism, they form part of a thoroughgoing exposition of the Reformed understanding of the Christian faith." (p122)

There are other striking features. Guido de Bres' statement on the church is remarkable: "this holy church is preserved by God against the rage of the whole world, even though for a time it may appear very small in the eyes of men – as though it were completely extinguished." To Christians in comfortable settings that seems nonsense. But de Bres knew what it was to be a hunted heretic. His words are "both a salutary rebuke to triumphalism and a great encouragement to those who live in parts of the world where the most noticeable aspects of the church are her outward weakness and suffering." (p123).

Also, the pastoral beauty of the Heidelberg Catechism is at its most wonderful in the first and last questions. ("What is thy only comfort in life and death? That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own… etc."; "my prayer is more assuredly heard of God, than I feel in my heart that I desire these things of him.").

The Westminster Standards
There had always been complaints that the BCP was not Reformed enough. In 1595 Archbishop Whitgift had sought to safeguard the Anglican church's teaching on predestination with his Lambeth Articles, but they never gained official status in England.

Parliament's approval in 1643 to revise Anglicanism followed, therefore, nearly a century of struggle over Anglican identity and evidence that the 39 Articles were inadequate to protect the Reformation legacy. And once the Scottish Presbyterians joined the civil war on Parliament's side and sent representatives to the Westminster Assembly the program changed from revising to rebuilding Anglicanism. Thus, the Assembly produced not only a Confession and Catechisms, but also a Directory for Public Worship which was intended to replace the BCP.

"The theology of the Standards is basically consistent with that of the Three Forms of Unity, articulating a theology that is Trinitarian and anti-Pelagian." (p127) There are a few differences, such as the WCF's much stricter view of the fourth commandment. Overall, the Westminster catechisms contain a much greater amount of more elaborate theology than Heidelberg.

That doesn't mean it can't be used in warm and pastoral way. Further, the Westminster Standards are full of acute pastoral insight. For example, the chapter on Assurance is deep and wise, noting that assurance and saving faith are not the same thing (the early Protestants tended to talk as if saving faith and assurance were virtually inseparable). There is real pastoral usefulness here. (See SCF 18.3)

Another example is WCF 15.5's very practical definition of repentance as involving a man repenting "of his particular sins, particularly." This is the concrete outworking of Christianity.

"Yet there is still more here: the minister who vows that he believes in, and will uphold, the system of doctrine taught in the Westminster Standards, is thus bound to practice and to teach others to practice this principle. [of serious and specific repentance] He is, in fact, as bound to this as he is to belief in the incarnation and the virgin birth. In other words, confessionalism is not simply about abstract doctrine; confessions also bind one to certain practices, certain ways of life. This is important to remember when reflecting on the opposition sometimes made between Christianity as a set of beliefs and Christianity as a way of life… A good confession binds doctrine and life…" (p129)

At this point we also note the Baptist Confession of 1689 (actually penned in 1677). It is a slight modification of the Westminster Confession, articulating a different view of baptism and also affirming an independent polity.

Concluding observations
First, the Reformation Protestant confessions were not trying to build theology anew. They stood on the framework of the early church.

Second, there is a remarkable degree of consensus among these documents on the basics of salvation. There is a real consensus on issues such as the nature and being of God, the history of salvation, and the nature of justification.

Third, there is divergence (notably the Lutheran and Reformed difference on the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper). This raises two important points – summed up as honest difference & ecclesiastical commitment:

<u>Honest difference</u>:
The fear of excluding someone often overrides notions of doctrinal precision. "The problem, of course, is that the church needs to take a position on certain things. Take baptism, for instance: either it is legitimate to baptize infants or it is not. There is no middle position. Further, one really cannot equivocate on this matter, because the answer one gives has a profound effect on how one understands entry into the church, the Christian life, and the nature of Christian nurture. The same applies to the Lord's Supper… If the church is the place where Christians receive their nurture and grow together, then there has to be clarity on such issues." (pp131-132)

"This leads directly to the particularity of confessionalism. Though we might talk about confessionalism as a principle when we refer to churches that hold to clearly stated doctrinal confessions, such churches always exist particularly. In other words, it is not the fact that they adhere to any confession that is the really important thing; it is the fact that they adhere to a *particular* confession. This is an important point because of the recent popularity of the term *confessional* evangelical… The problem with this terminology is that it is typically used today to refer to evangelicals who adhere to what we might call classical mere orthodoxy: an anti-Pelagian Trinitarianism that also upholds the Reformation teaching on justification. There are two problems with calling this *confessional* evangelicalism."

Firstly, this is not confessional in the classical sense, which "requires commitment to an elaborate confession of the kind that we find in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries… What we have today in confessional evangelical circles is rather an eclectic pick'n'mix approach to classical confessional Protestantism, where those matters which seem helpful to building a broad evangelical parachurch consensus are highlighted and those matters which divide – and have always divided Protestants – are set to one side as of less importance." (p132) One would assume that things which have caused division are likely to be very important. Thus, it "would seem a wholly arbitrary, and in fact counterintuitive move to build a *confessional* consensus by denying or ignoring those matters which made confessional necessary in

the first place. The use of the term 'confessional evangelicalism'… is misleading. Holding to some or all of the Five Points of Calvinism does not make one confessional. (pp132-133)

Ecclesiastical commitment

Second, being confessional is inextribably bound up with ecclesiastical commitment." "Confessions are only really confessions when they are adopted and confessed by a church. This requires at a minimum the existence of office-bearers bound by vow to uphold confessional teaching and structures and processes of accountability to ensure that the confession's teaching is what the church actually proclaims. This is consistent with [ch2 and Scripture's teaching]… on the church and her confession of the faith." (p133)

"Thus, to say that one is a *confessional* Christian requires that one also specify to which confession one adheres and in what specific church context one does so. It is an ecclesiastical term, a churchly concept, which only has real meaning in such a context… Confessional evangelicalism is simply a conservative form of mere Christianity, not the kind of elaborate ecclesiastical Christianity espoused by Luther, Bullinger, Calvin, or Cranmer."

"While all of this can seem rather negative, in actual fact what the Protestant confessions do is simply make explicit what is practically the case in any given church one might choose to attend. Churches are particular; they have particular beliefs and practices; and confessions give expression to that particularity." (p133)

Chapter 5: Confession as Praise

"To many modern evangelical ears, the idea of a confession of faith sounds just too cerebral and propositional to have much to do with the idea of Christian praise and doxology" (p135)– not least since they are judicial documents for deciding who can belong and who cannot. However, praise is a vital aspect of their function.

The basic worship cry "Jesus is Lord!" is "in itself a confession in the sense that it is both a public declaration of praise and a public declaration of doctrinal commitment. Arguably, all of Christian theology is simply one long running commentary upon, or fleshing out, of this sort, simple ecstatic cry." (p136)

We see this in Romans 10:9-10 (If you confess with your mouth… etc). The confessing referred to here is a public act – of both doctrine and doxology. We see both features elsewhere – e.g. Philippians 2:6-11 and 1 Timothy 3:14-16, 1:15-17. Here the content of this praise is itself highly polemical (giving worship to *this* God and denying the claims of *all* others, etc).

Thus, "doctrine or dogma is part of the very essence of Christianity. As we noted, statements that posit a gap, or even an opposition, between believing and belonging are fundamentally misleading. Believing is the means of belonging." (p139)

"In the Reformed constituency, the accent upon correct and precise doctrine can lead to an intellectualism that separates doctrine from doxology in a manner that is unfortunate and unbiblical. In other branches of the Christian church, an overemphasis on experience or activism or particular aesthetic forms can lead to the relegation of doctrine to a secondary position or even worse. This side of heaven it is unlikely that any church or congregation will ever achieve the perfect balance; but being aware of the problems and pitfalls does help us be more self-critical…" (p139)

To separate doctrine and Christian experience is "arguably, a species of liberalism, in which human religious psychology is definitive of Christianity… we must remember that liberalism is not primarily a rejection of the supernatural; it is a reconfiguration of the nature of Christianity in such a way as to highlight the religious psychology or experience and downplay or marginalise doctrine." (p142)

"The identity of whom we praise actually informs the content of how we praise him." (p142) The reason why some churches restrict public praise only to canonical Psalms is "precisely because they take very seriously the need for correct forms and content of congregational address to God." (p143)

The creeds can play a vital role in the church's praise – and not simply by declaring a set of propositional truths: "in reciting the words of the creeds together, each member of the congregation publicly identifies with every other member in expressing a corporate unity of belief in a common gospel. They are also expressing their common belief with every other Christian throughout history… [Thus], the confession (a document) becomes a confession (an act of pointing toward Christ before the church and the world)." (p144)

One thing the ancient creeds do is highlight that God is Trinity (a common weakness in contemporary church life). The facts of the Gospel are necessarily Trinitarian facts. As one united to Christ a Christian has a Trinitarian identity. The entry rite into the church – baptism – is itself Trinitarian in form. The Trinity should shape and pervade our worship, but often does not. There is no silver bullet that fixes this problem. The pastor and elders "need to be very intentional in how they integrate the identity of the Trinitarian God into the worship service" (p146) – biblical songs and hymns, the overall shape of the service, careful and clear Trinitarian doctrine in preaching, plus very obviously the use of the Nicene Creed. On its own it is not enough – but needs to be connected to clear teaching.

Some object to creeds and liturgy in general arguing that it leads to a mere formalism and outward show. And it can do so. But that's not the fault of the creeds themselves. And the Bible itself contains liturgies or set prayers (the Psalms are the most obvious examples). Plus, all Christian churches have liturgies in the

same way that all Christian churches have creeds. “The only real point of difference between churches on this issue is the level of self-consciousness and explicity formality with which they are held.” (p148) And it is not the case that “spontaneity” or “authenticity” are Biblical hallmarks of worship. Arguably these terms reflect the modern idea that self-creation and -expression is key to who we are. This can be outright in opposition to the Gospel. I am made in God’s image, but fallen and needing the redemption which is only in Christ. “Those are truths that apply to me as to everybody else. And my response in worship, whatever particular culture I belong to, must reflect those commonly shared realities. That is why a common confession is a good thing: it makes the point that my faith is the faith of the other people in the church – both today and throughout the ages.”

Creedal doxology has three aspects:

- Teaching: in it all the church members remind each other of the identity of God. They can help deal with our generation’s relative theological and biblical illiteracy. (Obviously this needs addressed in preaching, Sunday School classes, small group meetings, and through the habit of family and private devotions. “Two short Bible readings and one thirty-minute sermon each Sunday will not solve the problem.” (p152) The current habit of expository preaching is an improvement on the older habit of preaching verse-by-verse, in that allows more of the Bible to be covered. But even so “it can end up offering a rather narrow slice of the Bible’s teaching and leave people vulnerable to developing a fragmented or fundamentally unbalanced theology. There is an obvious need for a helpful framework as a basic part of theological education at the very outset of the task and at every step along the way.” (p152) Recitation of the creeds can be a help, as can confessional material and catechisms. Catechisms can help to shape topical preaching on the main *loci* of doctrine and the Christian life. And they can be used in worship as part of the liturgical action.

- Counter-culture: in the creeds and confessions we explicitly, publicly, and defiantly deny the claims of all other would-be gods; and we ascribe to him the glory which is his alone. Of course, we first must be persuaded that worship is meant to be counter-cultural; reciting a creed fits very badly in the seeker-sensitive services of the 80s and 90s, or even in the more recent habit of offering themed services that cater to different tastes (trad, contemporary, jazz, etc). The one description of an unbeliever’s reaction to a Christian worship service is in 1 Cor. 14:23-25 – he falls on his face to worship and to declare that God is truly present there. “It is not the similarity of the church to the world that is the key to this drama; it is the difference that the unbeliever finds so striking.” (p155) This counter-cultural feature of worship comes in various forms: the public reading of God’s Word – being confronted by God’s revelation; singing praise to Him; and also the corporate reading of a creed or confession – because they summarise Bible truth and assert God’s sovereign kingship in such a way that the claims of his creatures are relativized.” (p156)

- Creeds ascribe to God what belongs to Him alone. We forget God and domesticate him. “We go to church each week in part to be reminded by that Word which comes from outside of us who God is, what he has done, and what he will do. The corporate recitation of a creed forces us to engage in the positive action of ascribing to him that which is his.” (p156). And if we use songs written beforehand and sung in unison by everyone present why would we object to reciting a creed? Such an objection is more likely a judgement based on taste.

Chapter 6: on the usefulness of creeds and confessions

Thus far we've seen that creeds and confessions are not only consistent with biblical teaching but strongly implied by it. Also, we've seen from church history that they have often been a help in maintaining and growing the Christian faith. Here now are a series of further advantages the church enjoys by giving creeds and confessions their proper place in her daily life.

1. All churches and all Christians have creeds and confessions

No church or Christian simply believes the Bible. "No Christian, if asked by a friend what the Bible teaches, is simply going to start reading aloud at Genesis 1:1 and not stop until Revelation 22:21. Instead… we all try to offer a synthesis, a summary of what the Bible says. And as we move from biblical text to theological statement, we offer what is, in terms of content, something akin to a creed or confession." (p160)

Failing to acknowledge the existence of one's own framework means that framework cannot be assessed in the light of Scripture. And given that the Bible itself commands faithful doctrine and the passing on of the same – and also implies and uses creedal formulas itself – such a failure is faulty. A church which "is open about its confessional position is, in theory at least, better able to do justice to the supreme authority of Scripture." (p161)

The church "also needs mechanisms to ensure that, on the one hand, the confession does not become an unassailable idol and, on the other hand, that it is not subject to the arbitrary wild interpretation. No system can do this perfectly" – because of our ongoing sinfulness. But being open about confessional commitments and trying to maintain a structure of governance which reflects a biblical eldership will make a church "better placed to negotiate the relationship between Scripture and confession than the church which lacks these things." (p162)

"In confessional Presbyterianism, the church typically requires all office-bearers to profess belief in the system of doctrine as expressed in the Westminster Standards, to uphold the teaching thereof, and to register any change of mind with the relevant body." (p162) What would be disingenuous would be for a church to claim to hold to a certain confessional position and yet allow someone taking the opposite view to hold ministerial office." (p163)

Thus, any change should be accomplished "in a manner that is public, transparent, and which involves wrestling with Scripture's teaching in a corporate context. Such a procedure would not simply allow the church's ministers to stand up one Sunday and teach whatever they wanted on the topic." (p163)

2. Confessions delimit the power of the church

This point is often missed – and feels counter-intuitive in our age which is suspicious of creedal documents as tools to exclude some and manipulate others. To establish church power within appropriate limits there needs to be: (i) a clear understanding of what the church is; (ii) a statement of the church's beliefs – i.e. a confession of faith; (iii) procedures that explain and define how the confession of faith is practically applied within the congregation. Here, a confession "describes the message which the church is to preach, and it limits the church's power to what is contained within that document." (p165) It cannot guarantee there will be no abuse of power. But good confessions properly handled by suitable elders "do actually hinder despotic church power and protect the members; they do not facilitate it." (p167)

3. Creeds and confessions offer succinct and thorough summaries of the faith

First, they focus the church's mind on the main thing: the doctrines of God, of creation, of Christ, of redemption, of salvation, and of consummation. It is "a built-in gospel reality check." (p168)

Second, they are succinct summaries – even the more elaborate 16th and 17th century texts like the Belgic and the Westminster confessions. Actually, they "typically cover only the really basic heads of Christian doctrine… One might dissent from the content of such topics in the Confession but one could scarcely argue that they did not represent some of the most basic concerns of the Bible itself." (p169)

A church should ask itself: does its confession give its elders the necessary material to maintain as far as possible the orthodoxy of the church? It needs to reflect the doctrinal emphases and priorities of Scripture. For example, there is extensive Biblical teaching on baptism – so it seems unwise for a church's statement of faith not to articulate a specific position on this matter. "I would argue that the church which sees the issues is of great importance, whatever the conclusion about its mode and subjects, is more consistent with New Testament emphases than the one which ignores the matter in its confessional statement or simply leaves it up to the conscience of the individual." (p169)

Further, "for a church to maintain a consistently orthodox witness, a certain level of ineradicable complexity is necessary in her doctrinal statements in order for them to be theologically stable. Church history illustrates the inter-connectedness of doctrines and a level of complexity that you can't get away from.

4. Creeds and confessions allow for appropriate discrimination between Members and Office-Bearers
What is their function for non-office-bearing members? "It is surely important, and consistent with a view of God as merciful and gracious, that we set the bar for membership no higher than which we find in the Bible itself." (p172)

Matters like the doctrine of the Trinity "are things that the church is to teach to her members, not require of them prior to entry… Membership is not a reward for achieving a high level of doctrinal knowledge any more than a high level of personal holiness. It is the gateway to the means by which these things can become possible via the ordinary means of grace." (p172)

But the qualifications for an elder are of a different order. See 1 Tim. 1, and 3:1-7. "Paul assumes that the teacher is to have a certain doctrinal competence which may not typically mark the church member." (p174). Each church or denomination needs to ask, what is it that elders are to be competent to teach? It is not sufficient simply to say "the Bible" – for the reasons outlined above. For, when he preaches, he interprets the Bible, he does not simply read it aloud to his congregation. And if he decides the text means one thing this week and the opposite the next, how can the congregation hold him to account for what he is teaching?" (p174)

"If your church has a minimal doctrinal basis or statement, however, the response might be that elders should be free to teach whatever they consider to be consistent with Scripture, which is also consistent with the doctrinal basis. This is plausible but points us to the problem noted above, that Christian theology has a certain ineradicable complexity, whereby certain doctrines stand in positive connection to others, and where modification of one might well require modification of another." (p175) The church that "can only regulate the teaching that it permits in a minimal way is never going to rise above that minimal level when it comes to coherent, public, doctrinal testimony." There is a need for mechanisms to put into practice the Bible's teaching on the church and its elders. "The most obvious way of doing this is to require elders to subscribe to a confession of faith that articulates the kind of doctrinal complexity which is necessary for the elaboration and defence of the central tenets of the faith." (p175)

5. Creeds and confessions reflect the ministerial authority of the church
Church elders are not part of an unassailable hierarchy. But the default position towards them should be on of trust and obedience (which carries a huge weight of responsibility). While still being like the Bereans "we should be less confident in of our [private] judgement and more inclined to trust the church" (p176) – and thus should take seriously the corporate documents because they are upheld by the elders of the church.

6. Creeds and confessions represent the maximum doctrinal competence that can be expected from a congregation
They have a teaching function in the church, as succinct doctrinal summaries. They "represent that which the church aspires to teach its members, and that is why confessional churches typically have at least one catechism among their subordinate standards." (p177)

“For a church to hold to a creed or confession, to require subscription to the same from her office-bearers, is to send a signal to the congregation about what the church considers to be important in her doctrinal life.” (p178)

On one level this is to be minimal. We want church membership to be as inclusive as the Bible makes it. “Nevertheless, we surely do not want to send a signal to the congregation that members should simply be satisfied with a basic, mere Christianity, especially since the Bible itself clearly sets an ambitious standard for doctrinal understanding and expects growth in such understanding to be a normal result of belonging to the church.” (p178) “Membership is the beginning, not the end, of the pedagogical process.” (p179)

A church confession “also represents an aspirational ideal of what the eldership hopes will be the appropriate level of doctrinal competence for the congregation.” (p179) “This is not to say that individual church members cannot and will not deeper their theological knowledge in ways untouched by the confession. Indeed, it should be the hope of every church that the membership will be as theologically well-read and literate as possible. Nevertheless, as the confession sets out what the church considers to be vital, and also sets the material parameters of the church’s pedagogical power, we must understand that it represents the maximum that can be *officially* expected of church members as they mature and grow.” (p179)

So ask: “What vision do we wish to give our people, from the most recent convert to the long-established church member?” (p179) A good confession is “not a stick with which to beat people – the popular image that often grips that mind of many believers – but an exciting map of the territory of biblical truth and something to which to aspire.” (p180)

This highlights a limited role which parachurch organisations should play in the Christian life. They have relatively minimal doctrinal statements, usually sidelining the sacraments and sometimes key soteriological doctrines such as election in order to hold diverse Christians together. If they then become primary, rather than the church, key confessional distinctives will be thought of as unimportant or even pointlessly divisive.

7. Creeds and confessions relativise the present
They are immune to the passing fads and tastes of the present. And they are profoundly countercultural in a biblical way, signalling to church and world that past is important as the present – or even more so (recall Exodus 12’s rooting of Israel’s identity in God’s past acts of salvation, or Paul’s charge to Timothy which was not of innovation but holding fast to a pattern of sound words). We are saying “that the church is bigger tha my day and generation.” (p182) The church needs to cultivate such a counter-cultural culture. “If the people are saying the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed on a Sunday, if Sunday school classes use the historic confessions as pedagogical guides, and if preachers refer on regular occasion to statements within these documents, then the people will become used to the idea that the church’s past is of perennial, vital relevance. The Christian mind is not only doctrinal; it is also marked by a certain attitude to the past. And church practice, as well as church teaching, plays an important role in the cultivation of this.” (p182)

8. Creeds and confessions help to define one church in relation to another
Honesty and transparency – it allows those outside to see what a particular church represents. And it helps members, who can point the visitor to a succinct summary of the church’s position on key doctrinal topics.

9. Creeds and confessions are necessary for maintaining corporate unity
Our age yearns for inclusiveness. But belonging and believing are two sides of the same coin. And whilst Christianity cannot be reduced to doctrine, it cannot be meaningfully separated from it either. Using creeds and confessions defines who the church is doctrinally – which necessarily implies boundaries and the sad possibility of exclusion. More often, the unity will manifest itself positively: “the congregation reciting (and rejoicing in) the words of the Apostles’ Creed on a Sunday morning; new Christians affirming their belief before the congregation by taking the same vows as the other members have done before them; and worship services marked by a common vocabulary on the lips of all members as they praise their common Lord.” (p185)

Chapter 7: Conclusion, & Appendix: on supplementing and revising confessions

"Creeds and confessions at their best present the church with beautiful summaries of biblical teaching, which are designed not simply to preserve the faith, but also to be part of the very life of the worshipping community." (p189)

"The last few decades have seen some high profile conversions from evangelical churches to Roman Catholicism." Why? Possibly because of weaknesses in evangelicalism: e.g. a lack of historic rootedness, serious doctrinal weight, and a preference for experience, activism, and mere Christianity. "I believe there is an alternative to Rome: it is confessional Protestantism. By that, I do not mean the confessional Protestantism that cherry-picks which bits of various Protestant confessions it likes, assembling an eclectic and minimal conservative Protestant consensus. I mean true confessionalism, one that adheres to a particular confession and connects this to a particular church order and polity." (p189)

On revising confessions:
Some cautions: (i) these are churchly documents, so this work is not the task of individual church members but must be done by the church. (ii) "we need to understand that subscribing to a creed or confession does not mean that we believe every phrase in the document was as well expressed as it could have been or that if we wrote it today we would use exactly the same vocabulary and phrasing… Thus, confessional revision is not justified simply on the grounds of verbal clumsiness." (pp192-193) (iii) Revisions can have consequences – e.g. the addition of the *Filioque* clause to the Nicene Creed, and the American modification to the WCF's section on civil government. (iv) Remember our own perspective is limited.

"When such a change is made by the church, those who are individual officers have… three options: they can actively concur with the change; they can passively submit to the change; or they can peaceably withdraw in light of the change… Thus, all officers have the right not to have their consciences bound by changes imposed on them by the church relative to the form or content of subscription. What they do not have, however, is the right of permanent protest within the church." (p195)

On supplementing confessions:
Be cautious! There "is always a place in church life for occasional documents, reports, or statements which make the church's view on a particular topic clear… [But] there is – or should be – a difference between occasional statements and confessionally binding documents." (p196)