

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

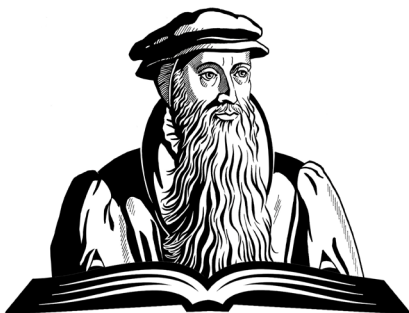
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 1:

INTRODUCTION and THE DOCTRINE OF FIRST PRINCIPLES

Lecture 2

INTRODUCTION (2): CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS



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Module 1 ~ Lecture 2

Introduction:

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The Doctrine of First Principles:

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SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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Module 1 ~ Lecture 2

Introduction (2): Creeds and Confessions

It was the year 325 AD. The Christian emperor Constantine had invited leading ministers from throughout the world to gather for a meeting in the city of Nicaea, which was located in what is now northwest Turkey. The purpose of the meeting, which became known as the Council of Nicaea, was to settle an important theological dispute that had risen in the churches within the Empire. At the heart of the controversy were questions about the deity of the Son of God, and His relationship to the Father. On one side, you had a leader named Arius who was a very eloquent and popular preacher. He taught that the Son was created, that He had a beginning, and that He was not of the same divine nature as the Father. On the other side, stood Alexander of Alexandria and his more famous assistant, Athanasius, who asserted that the Son of God was eternally begotten of the Father, was of the same divine nature as the Father, and who therefore was not created and had no beginning. In the middle, stood a body of ministers who were unclear or undecided on what to think. Notably, all parties on both sides affirmed that the Scriptures were the inspired Word of God, and both sides claimed that the Bible taught their respective positions. But both positions obviously could not be true.

We cannot explore the fascinating details here, but the result of the debates led the overwhelming majority of ministers at the Council of Nicaea to affirm that the Bible taught the divine nature of the Son of God. As a result, they produced a creed, the Nicene Creed, which served as the church's corporate profession of true biblical doctrine, and distinguished those truths from false doctrines that must be condemned. Ever since, the Nicene Creed has served as a standard of what a true Christian and a true church must believe on these points of doctrine.

The first two lectures in this module—the previous one and this one—serve as a general introduction to the entire series of seven separate modules that take us through the study of systematic theology. In the first lecture, we considered the methodology employed in systematic theology. In this present lecture, we will investigate the important place and use of creeds and confessions of faith.

So let's begin by defining those terms. The English word "creed" derives from the Latin word "credo," which means "I believe." So a creed is simply a statement of what we believe the Bible teaches. Similarly, the word "confession" means an acknowledgement. So a confession of sin, for example, is an acknowledgement of our sin, or saying about our sin what God says about it. Likewise, a confession of faith is an acknowledgement of true doctrine, or saying the same thing

about doctrine as what God says in the Scriptures. As you can see, creeds and confessions refer to the same thing—authoritative documents that affirm the true doctrines taught in the Bible, and that therefore distinguish those true doctrines that we must believe, from the false doctrines that we should reject. The word “orthodox” means “straight thinking,” over against, you know, crooked thinking or mistaken thinking. So orthodox doctrine refers to true biblical doctrine upheld by the true church throughout the ages.

Creeds and confessions of faith are related to systematic theology and employ a similar methodology to what we considered in the first lecture. In one sense, confessions are a compressed statement of systematic theology. That is, they categorize and organize biblical teaching on select doctrines and summarize those truths with precise brevity. But they have the additional authority of being affirmed by the corporate church as definitive expressions of orthodox doctrine. It is for that reason that we will make reference to creeds and confessions in our broader study of systematic theology, especially to one confession, the Westminster Confession of Faith, as we’ll note further in what follows.

As you’ll recall from the first lecture, within the general parameters of systematic theology, we are using, for the purposes of these courses, a fourfold method. That is, we are expounding and explaining what the Bible teaches about each doctrine, under four categories: a scriptural exposition, a doctrinal exposition, a polemical exposition, and a practical exposition. And we will employ those four components even in this secondary lecture.

So that brings us to our first point. We’ll begin by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the importance of creeds and confessions, and their relationship to our study of systematic theology. So this is the scriptural exposition. Consider what Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 1:13. He said, “Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.” With these words, the Apostle prepared his young apprentice, Timothy, to be plunged into some of the most severe upheaval the Church of Jesus Christ has endured in two millennia. Titus’s siege of Jerusalem, and with it the collapse of the world around Christ’s infant church, was looming in the near future. The martyrdom of the Apostle Paul under the bloody hands of the tyrant Nero was imminent, as you see in chapter 4, verses 6 and 7. So this second epistle to Timothy serves as a record of Paul’s last written words. They exude the tenderness of a father to his spiritual son. Where did Paul set the gaze of those left in such a desperate condition? Well, in short, he challenged Timothy to persevere in the things he had been taught. Notice that the particular emphasis in this context is placed on maintaining the apostolic truth that Timothy had received. Paul forewarned that “perilous times would come,” 2 Timothy 3:1, and one mark of those fast-approaching times was that men would “resist the truth as you see in 3:8. This included professing Christians who would “not endure sound doctrine” and “turn their ears away from the truth,” you see in 4:3–4. Even as the apostle wrote, some of his fellow co-laborers were abandoning that truth; note the reference in 1:15 and 4:14 and 16.

Timothy’s attachment to the truth was indispensable. It was indispensable for both Timothy and the church he served. Paul said to him, in 1 Timothy 4:16, “Take heed to thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself and them that hear thee.” So Timothy was told to “hold fast,” to cling to, or to tightly grip true doctrine, just as you would hold onto a safety rope for dear life. It also includes persevering in that truth.

The “form,” or pattern, “of sound words” refers to apostolic biblical truth; note Paul’s language. He says, “which thou hast heard of me.” And the motivation for holding fast is both faith and love in Christ. After all, it is Christ’s truth, and therefore it is an expression of holding fast to

Christ Himself. We must believe and love all that Christ reveals. Remember how Jesus commissioned His people to “teach the nations to observe all things whatsoever I command you,” as you read at the end of Matthew 28. And Jude 3 exhorts us to “earnestly contend for the faith that was once delivered unto the saints.” Paul’s words in 2 Timothy 1:13 make clear that the Scriptures teach a coherent and consistent system of truth which is both identifiable and defensible. The church must discriminate between truth and false perversions of that truth in order to “hold fast the form of sound words.” Creeds and confessions express obedience to that biblical obligation.

Secondly, we need to consider a doctrinal overview or exposition of the biblical necessity of creeds and confessions. The Scriptures provide several categories that reinforce their necessity and value, thus demonstrating that the very nature of biblical Christianity requires being a confessional—or we could say creedal—church. We can note several things.

One is the nature of the church itself. The early church was defined by their adherence to biblical truth. Acts 2:42 says, “and they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine.” We saw earlier from Jude 3 that God had given an absolute objective belief system that we are responsible to maintain. Indeed, the church is called “the pillar and ground of the truth,” in 1 Timothy 3:15. Paul writes to the Thessalonians in 2 Thessalonians 2:13–15, saying that just as they were chosen to salvation through “belief of the truth,” “therefore,” he says, “brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.” So we have the nature of the church.

Secondly, we have the nature of God, who Himself is truth. Remember Jesus’ words, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” So veracity is an attribute of God’s divine being. He Himself is truth. It’s not just that He has truth, it’s not just that He speaks truth, but that He Himself in His divine being is truth. And this reinforces for us the sanctity of truth. Truth is not something that is incidental, not something that can be handled casually, not something that you can take or leave, or trade, like you would some small object. There’s a sanctity in the truth because of the nature of God.

Thirdly, we have the nature of the Bible, which is also truth. Jesus prayed in John 17:17, “Sanctify them by Thy truth: Thy word is truth.” So the Holy Scriptures are a communication of God’s mind, and providing for us eternal truth. And so the nature of the Bible reinforces the necessity of these affirmations of true doctrine.

A fourth category is the constant danger of what the Bible calls “grievous wolves” that are “speaking perverse things” and imposing falsehood. That’s the language that Paul used when he addressed the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28 and 29. You remember how Paul reinforces this with the Galatians and tells them, Listen, it doesn’t matter who comes and tells you another gospel than the one that you’ve received, even if it’s an angel from heaven, even in that circumstance, you’re to reject it and hold fast to the truth. The Old Testament is full of descriptions of false prophets who came in God’s name and who claimed to be telling the truth, but who in fact were teaching falsehood. In the New Testament, likewise, we have references to false teachers. Paul warns of those who teach even “doctrines of devils” in 1 Timothy 4:1. He says, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth,” (2 Timothy 4:3).

Another set of Scripture’s doctrines that reinforce this, teach that ministers are held accountable for faithful doctrine. Now, this can be seen in many places. But in Titus 1:9, we read that an elder must be “holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.” So Paul tells Timothy, in 1 Timothy 1:3, to charge these men “that they teach no other doctrine.”

But it's not just true for ministers. Individual Christians are also held responsible for faithful doctrine. Think of the words found in Ephesians 4:14, "that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive." And so the individual Christian also has a very special interest in maintaining true doctrine.

Lastly under this point, we see that God's people have always been a confessional people. In the Old Testament, the saints maintained a faithful testimony of God's redemption. Go back and read, for example, Deuteronomy 26. And this included a discriminating commitment to biblical faith. Joshua stands before the people of Israel and says, you know, "Choose you this day whom you're going to serve. If Jehovah is God, serve him, if Baal, serve him; but as for me and my house, we're going to serve the Lord." And you have that sort of language that is woven throughout the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Jesus Himself, we're told, made "a good confession." And we have various examples of personal confessions that were made. You'll remember how we're told that if we do not confess Christ before men, that He will not confess us before His Father in Heaven. We also read about church councils that passed authoritative declarations over controverted matters. You see this at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, and you see the byproduct of that in the opening verses of chapter 16, especially verse 4.

And so in all of this, we see a doctrinal exposition, how these various parts, truths, components, doctrines fit together to reinforce this main point about the necessity and use of creeds and confessions.

But thirdly, we have the polemical category. Many modern Christians will object to the necessity and value of creeds and confessions. So we need to consider some of the primary arguments against the use of creeds.

First of all, some assert that "We have no creed but Christ, and no book but the Bible." What do you think of that statement? Well, the fact is that that statement is self-contradictory. You may ask, "Well, why is that?" Remember that the word creed means "I believe." So a creed is a statement of what you believe the Bible teaches. So as soon as someone stops directly quoting the Scriptures and makes any comment about what it teaches, they are in essence stating their creed. In other words creeds and confessions are logically inescapable. The real question is whether you have a good creed or a bad one; whether you have one that is clear and cogent and careful, one that is accurate, one that unites your belief with what faithful churches as a whole affirm. If a church says they have no creed but the Bible, then they're left to the fluctuations of whatever their pastor happens to say from the pulpit each week. That, in fact, becomes their creed, however incoherent it may be.

Secondly, others assert that creeds and confessions somehow undermine the ultimate authority of Scripture because having a formal creed places it above the Bible. Well, is this true? We affirm that the Scriptures are the inspired infallible and inerrant word of God. Creeds and confessions, of course, are not. They are uninspired documents. In fact, the best confessions affirm this very point, for example, the Westminster Confession of Faith. But a good creed or confession, however, is a fallible expression, true—a fallible expression of infallible truths.

Unalterable doctrines are timeless truths that can be expressed in a multitudinous number of ways. Some doctrines are so clearly taught in the Bible that they must be seen as unalterable; that they cannot be abandoned without even damning error, and that they are required to maintain biblical orthodoxy. That would include, for example, the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. Now, we can express that doctrine in various uninspired words. We can say God's word is inspired; we

can say what the Bible says, God says; we can say the Scriptures are ultimately authored by the Holy Spirit, and so on. All of these are uninspired words that are describing a biblical and certain doctrinal truth. And so it is incomprehensible, therefore, for allegiance to the primacy of the Bible to require a willingness to view, for example, the doctrines of inspiration and infallibility and inerrancy and sufficiency and primacy of Scripture, as creedal doctrines which undermine the Bible. And that doesn't make any sense, much less to do it under the guise that the affirmation of these truths are cast in uninspired language. If that were true, which it is not, then alleged fidelity to Scripture would give way to infidelity. You see, creeds in fact preserve the churches against such errors that undermine the ultimate authority of Scripture.

Thirdly, others object that creeds create controversy. But the truth is that sin and error breed controversy, and that, rather, creeds and confessions resolve controversy, by holding fast to the form of sound words. In other words, it is false doctrine that divides, and it is true doctrine that unites. A historical example would be the formulations of the doctrine of the divine nature of God the Son, which we referenced earlier in this lecture. Those formulations came out of the heated controversies of the early church. But those formulations, though uninspired, like the Nicene Creed, have become a standard of orthodoxy that have been repeatedly put to the test by challenge after challenge after challenge throughout the centuries, but have nevertheless continued to be maintained to the present. To this day, if someone rejects the classical, though uninspired, expressions of the doctrine of Christ's deity, then they are considered, rightly, a heretic. It is possible, of course, that time and greater light will prove the orthodox doctrine of the divine nature of God to be true. Is it possible that time will prove it to be wrong? Clearly not. It is divine truth, and time will not change that. What is true today will be true one thousand years from now. The wording of the formulations is uninspired, but the doctrines remain fixed. New light may break forth and give new depths of insight and clarity to the doctrine, but time will not disprove what we already know of the doctrine of Christ's deity. These doctrines of God's Word must be unalterably maintained by every generation until Christ's second coming. Martin Luther wrote, "If I confess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at the moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ." A twentieth-century theologian, J. Gresham Machen, wrote that "the type of religion which shrinks from controversial matters will never stand amid the shocks of life. In the sphere of religion," he said, "as in other spheres, the things about which men are agreed are apt to be the things that are least worth holding; the really important things are the things about which men will fight." You see, the cause of controversy is bad, because the cause is sinful error, or corrupt doctrine. But in God's gracious disposal of things, the fruit of controversy is often good, because it brings greater clarity to the details of biblical doctrine.

Before we pass from this point, let me also provide an abbreviated summary of some of the creeds in church history. We began by telling the story of Athanasius at the Council of Nicaea, and I mentioned that they produced the Nicene Creed. There was an earlier creed which we sometimes call the Apostles Creed, or the Apostolic Creed, or the Twelve Articles. That's one of the earliest creeds in the church, and you have twelve doctrines in a very brief concise compressed form, articulated about what the true Christian is to believe.

The Council of Nicaea was only one of several ecumenical councils where ministers from around the world gathered together in order to hash out and clarify what the Bible taught on various points, and you have other creedal statements that came out of that. The Council of Constantinople was another important one for the doctrine of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity. We

have what we call the Athanasian Creed, and there are others. But fast-forwarding, you come to the period of the Reformation, in the sixteenth century, and the post-Reformation, or Second Reformation, in the seventeenth century. And there were dozens of Reformed creeds and confessions that were produced at that time, which were mostly relatively in agreement with one another. The Lutherans in Germany produced the Augsburg Confession in the Formula of Concord. In England, they produced the 39 Articles. The Swiss on the continent produced the Helvetic Confessions. The Dutch in the Netherlands produced what we call the Three Forms of Unity—the Canons of Dordt, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Belgic Confession.

In Britain, later on, they produced what we call the Westminster Standards—the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Larger Catechism, and the Shorter Catechism, along with some other documents that were produced by the Westminster Assembly. This was in the middle of the seventeenth century; the Westminster Assembly met from January 1643 through February 1652, though most of the work was completed by 1648. At that assembly, the Westminster Assembly, you had over 120 of the most godly and learned English Puritans, along with a delegation of Scottish Presbyterians. And the documents that they produced, including the Westminster Confession, became the confessional standards of Presbyterian and Reformed churches around the world ever since. One of the benefits of the Westminster Confession of Faith is that it came later, in the Second Reformation, and therefore perhaps brought even greater clarity of the collected mature thought of the churches at the time. And it is the Westminster Confession of Faith that will serve as the primary creed or confession that will be referred to throughout these modules or courses.

Lastly, we have a practical exposition. In the consideration of creeds and confessions, we can draw practical application to ourselves. There is indeed a practical necessity of creeds. Let me mention just a handful of things. First of all, creeds provide a foundation for church unity—church unity that is built upon uniformity of true doctrine. The prophet Amos, in Amos 3:3, says, “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” We must be unified in the truth of God’s Word. First Corinthians 1:10 says, “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” This language of having the same mind and speaking the same truths occurs repeatedly throughout the New Testament. In Romans 15:6, it says, “That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” And so one practical application with regards to creeds and confessions is the way in which they foster and build unity within the church, providing a shared testimony, professing the same thing about what the Scriptures teach.

A second application is that creeds provide a standard for testing a person’s faithfulness to Scripture. Now you see this within the church itself; in 2 Timothy 2:2, Paul says, “And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.” So there were standards that ministers were held to. We noted that earlier under the doctoral exposition within this lecture. This is also true in our message outside the church. So Jesus in his Great Commission, in Matthew 28:19 and following, tells them to go and to teach the nations everything that Jesus Himself had commanded them. And so there’s a united voice or testimony to the world at large—“This is what God says, and this is who God is.”

It’s also helpful in this regard, in terms of examining new ideas and doctrines that arise. People come speaking new things. Think of the words of 1 Thessalonians 5:21, which says, “Prove,” or test, “all things; hold fast that which is good.” “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.”

Thirdly and lastly, in terms of practical application, creeds and confessions strengthen our clar-

ity and our conviction and our commitment to biblical truth. We can end where we began, with 2 Timothy 1:13, “Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.” The desire for clarity, conviction, and commitment to biblical truth is borne out in our appreciation for the use of creeds and confessions.

Well in conclusion, these first two lectures have provided a general introduction to the entire series of seven modules that will be going through on systematic theology. We considered both the biblical methodology employed in systematic theology, and the necessity and use of creeds and confessions. In the next lecture, we will now turn to the specific topic of this first module or course—the truths regarding what we call first principles. This will take us through a consideration of various biblical doctrines that are fundamental and primary to everything else that follows in systematic theology. As you’ll come to see, the bulk of this module pertains to the doctrine of Scripture, or what God teaches about His own Word, the Bible. But before we turn our full attention to Scripture, we will prepare the way with other important considerations.