

## Chapter 7

### Creedal Authority

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THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH HAS SEEN NO END TO THE heresies that have arisen. In fact, it is because of heresies that sound doctrine has been more firmly and accurately stated. God is the One who sends the heretics against the Church to test those who are truly faithful and to cast out the unfaithful (Deut. 13). At the times when the Church has been most powerfully attacked by heretics, the Holy Spirit has led her to respond by stating the truth in written format—the creed. This written statement is not intended to supersede the Scriptures but rather to be an authoritative interpretation of them. If a Mormon, a Jehovah's Witness, and a Protestant can all agree that "Jesus is God," then we need a more precise definition of what we mean by that. The Mormon's definition of that statement is "Jesus is (one of many) God(s)." The Jehovah's Witness' definition is "Jesus is (god, but not) God." These definitions do not in any way agree with the historic Christian understanding of "Jesus is God," and thus we need to define more clearly what we mean by the terms we use, which is done with written confessions of faith.

#### **Private "Creeds"**

Everyone who calls himself a Christian has a confession of faith or creed (from the Latin "credo," meaning

“I believe”); no one can consider himself a Christian and not have one. The situation that is unique today is that the majority of “creeds” are unwritten. People keep their creeds in their heads, with the result that (and sometimes the intent that) they can never be formally criticized.

Keeping one’s creed privately in the mind makes it very difficult to use. This is why we find evangelicalism dying (if not already dead) today. People have little, if any, organized thought about theology. They merely throw into their mental creed whatever comes their way, without ever considering whether it contradicts what else they believe. No formal criticism (even on their own) is ever done. In addition, a mental creed causes people to be unsure of what they believe; it is very difficult to look up chapter and verse in your head unless you have a photographic memory. I can remember in seminary when other students would firmly assert two completely contradictory teachings in the same sentence. My mind still reels to think that these men are pastors today.

When pastors have mental creeds and thus teach this to their people, we find Christians by and large becoming anti-creedal (even if they don’t know it). By “anti-creedal” I don’t mean they actively tell people not to believe anything, but they are telling people not to have *written* creeds.

In fact, many people who actually have a written creed (i.e., they belong to a church that claims a creed as its official statement of faith) live as though all they have is a mental creed. These are the people who don’t know what their church holds to as official doctrine. They know merely what they themselves hold to (sometimes) and so far haven’t heard anything from the pulpit they didn’t like. Scores of Christians go on like this throughout their entire lives. They go to one church until they hear something they don’t like, and then they

leave and start over again. This is not due solely to the fault of the people; it is also (if not more so) the fault of the pastors.

When we assert today the divinity of Christ, we do so by standing on the shoulders of the saints who have come before us. If they had not done the work, if they had merely maintained a mental creed and never clearly asserted their beliefs in writing, each and every Christian would have to sit down and decide for himself what he believed on every issue available. Can you imagine the chaos? If this were the state of affairs for the Church for the last two thousand years, we would still be like infants with no progress in our understanding of the Scriptures (Eph. 4:14).

### Public Creeds and the Final Advent

In the creeds we are confronting an authoritative body, which has, through the illumination of the Spirit, declared the truth of certain doctrines. One individual’s private judgment on a particular issue is easy to deny; the unanimous opinion of a group of faithful Christians is much more difficult to deny. If there is anything that can be seen as a unanimous opinion of the Church for the last two thousand years, it is that there will be a personal Final Advent of Jesus Christ, wherein He will bring judgment and resurrection upon all men who ever lived and at that time end the present system of things.

It has been said that “to some degree we all operate under the influence of believers who have gone before us.”<sup>1</sup> Though there are numerous “branches” of the Church of Jesus Christ, there is also one broad heritage that all “branches” have, and that heritage is the history of the Holy Spirit working through His people. Richard Pratt has noted that this history has been powerfully seen in the “ecumenical councils of the early church,” specifically the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Council of Chalcedon.<sup>2</sup> These creeds

have defined the parameters of Christian orthodoxy. If the pantelist wishes to question the accuracy of these councils as a whole (because they assert the physical return of Christ at the end of this world), then he must acknowledge that he is surrendering any grounds for an “orthodox” faith. He may claim that he still has the Scriptures as a grounds for an “orthodox” faith, yet by doing this he shows his similarity to the cults: they too claim that they interpret the Scriptures correctly, in spite of their extreme divergence from the historic Christian faith. If he denies the validity of all creeds, he must assert that “orthodoxy” is an open ground—thus allowing any heretic to be considered a true Christian, because there are no limits to his orthodoxy.

If the pantelists wish to call the Church to account on false teaching, they have picked an area that has some of the most solid attestation throughout the history of the Church. They cannot merely assert that the creeds are not correct and therefore define their “heterodoxy” out of existence. A common response to creedal assertions is that the Church fathers misinterpreted certain preterist texts and therefore erred in every point of eschatology. This argument does not hold water; the Church fathers also held to baptismal regeneration—that does not mean that everything they said in regard to the sacraments is faulty. Making an error in one area of doctrine does not *automatically* make everything within that doctrine faulty.

Some have tried to say that preterism is just as much against the creeds as pantelism is. We must assert that this is not true. The history of the Church has shown that new creeds were written to expand upon the previous creeds. What we consider the “ecumenical creeds” did not reject previous teaching but rather added to it and expanded upon it. *Expanding* upon a creed in response to a new situation in theological thought is completely in accord with the nature of the creeds and how

they have been written in the past (which is what preterism does). *Rejecting* a major doctrine of the creeds is completely out of accord with the nature of the creeds and how they have been written in the past (and this is what pantelism wants to do). Preterism accepts all that the creeds affirm in regard to the Final Advent and wishes to further acknowledge the spiritual comings of Christ in history. Pantelism denies what the creeds affirm in regard to the Final Advent and wishes to change what the Church has believed for her entire history. These are by no means the same thing.

The reason that dispensationalism is not considered heterodox is because it does not deny any of the essentials as found in the historic protestant creeds. Its adherents are, however, to be considered aberrant because they have added numerous errant teachings to the doctrine of the Final Advent. Some of these teachings (like those found in the Scofield Reference Bible) are derogatory to the orthodox faith (such as the teaching that sacrifices performed in the [supposed] future temple of Israel will be pleasing to God). Although they teach such lies (which in themselves are heresies), they are not heretics because they elsewhere hold to the truth of the sufficiency of the cross of Christ. (They are aberrant because their teachings are contradictory to the orthodoxy they hold to in other areas.)<sup>3</sup>

The Holy Spirit could have allowed the Church to go through her existence without the New Testament (the first Christians had nothing but the Old Testament), yet He chose to inspire the apostles to give us the fullness of revelation in written form. In doing this, He endorsed the written format of doctrinal statement as the one He saw as best for the Church. With this in mind, we can ask one question: how did the Holy Spirit lead the Church in the understanding of the Scriptures? Are there any pantelist creeds? No, the Spirit has led the Church consistently for the last two thousand years

to affirm that God has set a day in which Christ will come physically to this earth to resurrect and judge all men.

### Sola Scriptura

It is the Scriptures that we give absolute authority to because they are the very words of God. When the Church examines those Scriptures, she explains what the Spirit leads her to see by declaring those truths in creeds—"when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak" (John 1:13). The creeds are never considered (by the orthodox) to be above the authority of the Scriptures. But they are genuinely authoritative interpretations of the Scriptures. They are certainly not to be viewed the same as any other writing by a Christian, no matter how wise he may be. The creeds are the statement of the faithful Church as a whole, the body of Christ that possesses the guiding influence of the Holy Spirit. This does not assert that the Church, in council, is infallible; I want to make it clear that "all synods or councils, since the Apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both" (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 31.3).

Those who have this basic understanding of the position of creeds and the councils that write them could never agree with the pantelists who say, "People who belong to churches which worship using traditional liturgies . . . are not free to question the doctrinal statements found in these creeds."<sup>4</sup> If a congregation holds that the creeds cannot in any way be questioned, then they are in danger of leaving historic Christianity as a whole, let alone Protestantism.

Freedom to question and freedom to begin teach-

ing new doctrine based on novel theological assumptions are, however, not the same thing. We as Christians must work together in a community. There are no "lone ranger" Christians. If we allow either a modern interpretation or an ancient one (as those found in the creeds) to *dominate* our view of the Scriptures, we have a truncated view of truth. Both the past and the present are necessary to help us interpret the Scriptures. Preterism seeks to do this very thing. As preterists, we are seeking to re-examine the past (private) interpretations of certain Scripture passages while we carefully acknowledge that our forefathers may have been trying to teach something they knew was right but which sometimes used the wrong Scripture for the right doctrine (sometimes they did properly understand preterist passages). This can only be done by standing on our forefather's shoulders. As can be seen from the previous chapters, sufficient ground does not exist that would allow us to reject what the creeds say about eschatology, and acknowledging the need to reinterpret certain passages that are undeniably preterist does not lead one to reject everything they said.

The pantelist not only wants to reject the shoulders<sup>5</sup> (thus forcing himself to start at the bottom again), but he also wants to allow his modern interpretation to be a new authoritative mental creed. Thomas and Alexander Campbell sought to rid the Church of "sectarianism" by forming a society of Christians without a creed. Their spiritual children (the Church of Christ) are perhaps one of the most sectarian groups in the world. This is also where some of the largest groups of pantelists are coming from. Pantelists themselves are almost tyrannical in their mental creeds. They are in essence claiming that their unwritten creeds are completely authoritative for interpreting the Scriptures.

There is a crucial point that must be made at this time. Classical Protestantism holds that the "sola" in

“*sola Scriptura*” means that Scripture alone is the *sole infallible standard* of truth. That Scripture is the only *infallible rule* does not, however, mean that it is the only source of truth. To say that Scripture is the only place that truth can be found is to deny Scripture: the heavens themselves reveal the glory of God (Ps. 19:1). If the physical creation itself reveals eternal truth (Rom. 1:20), how much more should we expect to be able to find truth in the authoritative creedal statements of the Church, especially given the fact that the Church is designed by God to be the “pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15) and has been protected from mass theological error by the work of the apostles (Eph. 4:13).

If the pantelist is correct in his interpretation of the Scriptures, then he is also incorrect. If all has been fulfilled by A.D. 70, then Paul’s prediction of the soon-coming maturity of the Church, which would protect her against giving in to “every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14) must have been wrong; thus the Church gave in to an enormous wind of doctrine (in the teaching of the Final Advent being future), and therefore we aren’t safe from errors of this magnitude even today (maybe the creeds were wrong that God exists?).

### Court and Constitution

None of what has been said above in any way asserts that the councils or creeds are infallible. Yet there must be an authoritative system of checks and balances, or else private chaos would reign. In the Christian community, we are to balance three things and balance them well. We must balance the authoritative heritage of the past, of the present community we live in, and of our private judgment.<sup>6</sup> If we allow any one of these to be dominant over the other two, we will make mistakes (sometimes grave ones) in our interpretation of the Scriptures. The pantelist does not want to get rid of heritage *per se*, he merely wants to create a new heritage with

himself as the head. Because the Protestant Reformation rejected the teaching that tradition and Scripture are equal in authority, this does not mean that it rejected tradition wholesale (that was the error of the radical Anabaptists). The reformation put tradition in its place as the authoritative interpretation of Scripture—“It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially, to determine controversies of faith” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 31.2).

The reformers taught firmly that one of the greatest problems with Romanism was that it ignored the principle of *sola Scriptura*. Yet these same reformers were constantly quoting Augustine, Chrysostom, other fathers, and the creeds. We cannot forget that God created the Church as the “pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). To assert that the Church has not dealt properly with eschatology for the last two thousand years and has en masse allowed the traditions of men to define doctrine in this area is to assert that the pillar has fallen and the bulwark has been broken down. God designed the Church the way He did in order to protect against errors; did He fail in His design? Two thousand years of unanimous error would say that He did. If we in our sin can be strong enough to thwart God in His plans to protect the Church from radical apostasy, we have little confidence that the Church is right about anything, and we must spend eternity trying to get things right. If, however, God designed the Church correctly, then creeds are a proper part of confessing her faith.

What, therefore, is the relationship between Scripture and tradition? The analogy of a court and a constitution is appropriate here. A court without a constitution could not do much, unless of course it were to start cold with every decision (something akin to rejecting heritage on every issue). Likewise, a constitution without a court would merely sit there and never affect anything. Similarly, if every individual were a court,

we would have constant conflict. In our analogy, the one authoritative court is the Church (both past and present), and the constitution is the Bible, an infallible constitution.

With Scriptures being infallible, we have no need or right to criticize them. Although the statements of the court (both past and present) are authoritative and cannot be overturned by private individuals, they can be criticized and corrected by the Court itself. The statements (as we find them embodied in the historic creeds) are the court interpreting an infallible constitution. As the court comments, we accept the authority that the court has, recognizing that the court's authority is subject to the infallible authority of the constitution. If the court of the past is found to be wrong by the court of the present on a decision they made, the present court can go back and criticize them by the constitution (but only when the court itself is in humble submission to the wisdom God gave it and not in a proud arrogance that denies this). The frame of mind that says anyone may, at any time, question the wisdom of our forefathers in the faith merely because he sees fit to, is a radically "American" idea.<sup>7</sup> This modernistic frame of mind which puts forward the wisdom of the individual (or even a particular community) at the cost of all other individuals (or communities) is typical Enlightenment thinking found most clearly in the rugged individualism of America. It is not found in the scriptural understanding of the universal Church of Jesus Christ.

The creeds can be changed but not by rejecting them and writing new ones. That is the path taken by those who are outside of the historic Protestant Church (cults, etc.). The Holy Spirit has brought more unity in the history of the Church concerning the fact of the Final Advent than He has about virtually any other subject. If the pantelists wish to change the Church's position regarding the Final Advent, it will not be done by standing

outside the stream of Christian orthodoxy and yelling at those inside. Neither will it be done with the weak arguments and contradictory exegesis of Scripture that they have put forward. The pantelist is standing outside of where he should, with a divisive attitude, throwing broken arrows at the Church; he has little hope of bringing about the change he desires. If people are as undiscerning about pantelism as they have been about dispensationalism, then there may be a similar effect on the Church, but since Christ is putting all His enemies under His feet, pantelism will eventually be put there as well.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Pratt, Richard, *He Gave Us Stories* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1990) p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> What Scofield gives with one hand, "the fulfillment of the O.T. types . . . through the sacrifice of Christ" (note under Rom. 3:24), he takes away with the other, "these offerings [the ones done in the future in a "rebuilt" temple] will be memorial, looking back to the cross" (note under Ezek. 43:19).

<sup>4</sup> Leonard and Leonard, *The Promise*, p. 75.

<sup>5</sup> Notice though that the pantelist goes out of his way to assert that he is a faithful evangelical; a definition that could not exist without the assumption of the work done by millions of faithful (creed-writing) Christians before us! He chastises us when we say "orthodox," but he wishes to be considered "evangelical"—he wants to tell us not to eat cake while he is stuffing it in his mouth. The pantelist rejects the shoulders when they are inconvenient and do not fit with his predetermined theological grid; otherwise he uses them readily.

<sup>6</sup> See Pratt, *Stories*, chapter 3.

<sup>7</sup> Oddly enough, both dispensationalism and pantelism are predominantly American phenomena. Is this really surprising?