

Proposed change of the Church of Scotland's basis of faith from the Westminster Confession to the combined Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds

The Theological Forum of the Church of Scotland are proposing a fundamental change of the doctrinal focus from the Reformed position of the Westminster Confession of Faith to the more general and accessible documents of the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed; both in themselves excellent, but much more ancient than the Westminster Confession.

We don't know the precise date of the Apostles' Creed, but it is the oldest confession of the Early Church. The Nicene Creed follows from the Council of Nicaea 325 AD. which was called to debate the issue of the deity of Christ which the presbyter Arius was publicly denying. His infamous words were that "Christ was created and not begotten." Jesus was, therefore, an ordinary man. This was the reason for calling the ecumenical council at Nicaea. This council condemned Arius as a heretic and affirmed Christ as co-equal with the Father and, therefore, also God.

This was a step forward at the time of the young advancing Church of the 3rd century, and most importantly, it answers the first question of the Early Church which was, "is Christ God?" In addition, the Church also clarified the relationship between the Son and the Father.

We should be clear; the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed are being taken out of historical context. These are not distinctively reformed/protestant confessions. These ancient creeds can be accepted by all churches, including the Roman Catholic Church.

The issue therefore becomes, what kind of church is the Church of Scotland becoming? We have always been Reformed in nature and Protestant.

Along with the Westminster Confession there are, in full, another four reformed confessions of similar moment: The Augsburg Confession, the Belgic confession, the French Confession and The Second Helvetic Confession. These documents define the Reformed (Protestant) faith. The Church of Scotland was a leading member of the Reformed body who took the Westminster Confession as the basis of their Protestant belief.

If the Church of Scotland is to simply require allegiance to the Apostles Creed and Nicene Creed (which it will for new ministers and elders), and the Westminster Confession is included as a lesser part of the package of confessional standards, then the Westminster Confession of Faith will be subordinate to the other creeds. If this is the case, it gives up its association as a reformed body.

So, having the two early confessions as the major confessional part of a group of confessions is not an issue. However, if the Westminster Confession of Faith is relegated or taken to be subordinate to these, then this is a dishonest move, seeking to sneak out of what I have asserted above. The inclusion of the Westminster Confession seems aimed at placating reformed members and is a false and misleading declaration.

The Church of Scotland was a leading member of the reformed body who took the Westminster Confession, written over a long period, by the Westminster Assembly, as the full and adequate basis of their Protestant belief. This basis, completely biblical, taking the Bible as the Word of God, is comprehensive. Our major concern as Evangelicals is the ultimate authority of Scripture as the infallible Word of God Himself.

The primary issue arising from the proposal of the Theological Forum is that we change from the Westminster Confession of Faith as it is too weighty a comprehensive exhaustive and profound statement regarding the Reformed faith, to a makeshift package of the two most ancient documents which are not in themselves adequate as a statement of Reformed faith. Statements of vital doctrine such as 'Justification by Faith' are missing. Indeed, there is no mention of salvation anywhere! Such a silence cannot be taken to form a reformed statement of faith.

Therefore, by the Church of Scotland's efforts to become more relevant and accessible to the modern scientific mind-set, their proposals will not preserve the reformed nature of the Church, but rather, inevitably disembowel it.

The Adequacy of the Westminster Confession of Faith

In my view the Westminster Confession of Faith is excellent in both its content and the arrangement of the content in very clear chapters. The confession is completely grounded on scripture. It is the optimum communication of the reformed, Protestant faith. It is very clearly a comprehensive document which took years of deep prayerful consideration and analysis by the body of Western divines who did an excellent job.

The first chapter is on Holy Scripture which is, of course, the final authority of all matters of faith and doctrine and the Westminster Confession document is a clear expression of reformed belief.

Rev. Dr. J Bryson Arthur