



Introduction

We believe that this true Church must be governed by that spiritual polity which our Lord has taught us in his Word.

BELGIC CONFESSION - ARTICLE 30

The star-struck Corinthian Christians represent humanity's attempt to overcome a gnawing sense of divine and earthly alienation. These early Christians sought to bypass exile on earth by bending Christ's consummate kingdom into the present through works righteousness sophistry, cultural accomplishments, and mystical speculation. Sinners ever since have tried to overcome divine estrangement through various private and political forms of spiritual ambition – from mysticism and pietism to Christian nationalism and postmodern liberationism – from the continent of Africa to North America.

The Apostle Paul admonishes the Corinthian believers for thinking that they are already in heaven with four staccato sentences in the fourth chapter of his first epistle: "Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you!" (1 Cor. 4:8). Paul chastises these saints for trying to overcome sin and seize glory now through worldly wisdom; for confusing law and Gospel; for believing another gospel (2 Cor. 11:1-15).

With divine authority, Paul shepherds the wayward Corinthians back into the fold with his creed of knowing "nothing among you except Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1-5). Paul's theology of the cross

turns on the justification of sinners by faith alone in Christ alone by God's grace alone (2 Cor. 5:16-21). God's crucified action upon cosmic criminals justifies them and also sanctifies them for worship and life in this world. Christians work out their baptism into Christ by bearing the cross in all of life through various vocations (Matt. 16:24-28; 1 Cor. 7).

The Corinthian compulsion to work heaven into earth today is the perennial temptation of the church throughout the ages. Therefore, the recovery of the Apostle Paul's theology of the cross remains as relevant as ever. Herein lies the hermeneutical key to Scripture and the post-Apostolic creedal tradition. The best of the catholic and confessional Protestant standards cast the church in this crucified way: God's power hidden in weakness.¹ As Luther once wrote: The true church has always been a "forsaken city."² "[T]he cross alone is our theology."³

To faithfully confess is to respond to the cross in faith. Faith recognizes the cross in our confession derived from Scripture (Heb. 11:1-3).

This book calls the church to recover this theology – this creed – to be lived out under Christ's two-fold rule. Christians join as a band of pilgrims confessing their faith on the way to glory (Heb. 11:13-15). Confessing is central to a cross-bearing pilgrimage (Matt. 16:24). It means declaring baptism into Christ's justifying death and resurrection: to be worked out in a life of sanctification through weakness, suffering, and death (Rom. 6:1-11). Christians are dual citizens under Christ's two-fold rule. On the one hand, they are members of heaven – manifest in a counter-cultural institutional church (John 18:36; Matt. 5-7). On the other hand, they are citizens of an earthly kingdom governed by God's natural law and statesmen (Gen. 8:20-9:16; Rom. 13:1-7).

In the spirit of *semper reformanda*, can this book inspire us to confess Christ crucified anew?

1. Alister E. McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 30, 36, 41.

2. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986), 17:186.

3. *CRUX sola est nostra theologia*, D. Martin Luther's Werke. *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Bohlau, 1883-), 5:176.32. Walther von Loewenich once wrote: "For Luther the cross is not only the subject of theology; it is the distinctive mark of all theology"; see *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976), 17.

Confessing anew

Like Abraham, Moses, and the Old Testament prophets, the Apostle Paul stood firm for the righteousness that comes by faith. Paul suffered at the hands of immature Christians, false teachers, and secular authorities. He died for his confession.

“Here I stand”

Faithfulness to Christ has continued to wax and wane in the post-Apostolic church. Martin Luther (1483–1546) represents a high watermark during this period. As the forerunner of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, Luther solidified this with his speech at the 1521 Diet of Worms, where he was on “trial” for his opposition to the medieval Roman Catholic church that had exchanged the Gospel for the law through private penance and public politicking. Luther addressed church officials as well as the most powerful ruler of his day, Emperor Charles V. Luther stood firm.⁴

Luther recovered the Apostle Paul’s theology of the cross with justification by faith alone at the center, embedded in a political theology that distinguished an exiled church from earthly institutions. Commenting on Psalm 119:54, Luther remarks: “It is remarkable that the church is joyful in the place of her pilgrimage, and even of her humiliation.”⁵

Luther, like Calvin and other early Reformers, is an inspiration to the church today.

Where do we stand?

Works righteousness continues to be the perennial temptation for the church into the present day. This seduction unfolds among individuals, families, and small circles through special acts of devotion that add to Christ crucified alone for salvation. When opportunities arise, private piety can spread publicly by coordinating freedom from sin and heavenly glory with various forms of political liberation: from despotism and neo-liberalism to various forms of cultural Marxism.

4. Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 35–40.

5. *Luther’s Works* 11:454; cf. 1:195; 2:253; 4:215; 21:13; 28:133; 30:140–41; 42:38; 43:110.

My native South African context is a poignant example of how Western Christianity has sought to bypass the cross by translating subjective spiritual ambition into world transformation: from Dutch and British colonialism to Apartheid. Especially dangerous since the 1960s revolution is a brand of Christianity that equates salvation with the liberation of the socially oppressed. From this perspective, redemption is the deconstruction of the laws of reason, morality, sex, and gender to make way for the gospel of identity politics: constructed by the social justice concerns of the moment.

In today's interconnected world, the effects of globalization and digital communication mean that developments in California reach Cape Town almost instantaneously, and vice versa. In early 2025, South Africa drew international attention due to a series of politically sensitive events, ranging from a new bill to expropriate land without compensation and public scrutiny over white farm murders to the United States accepting Afrikaner refugees and the radical Marxist-Communist Economic Freedom Front leader, Julius Malema, calling for the killing of white Afrikaners. These developments unfold against a complex historical backdrop shaped by colonial legacies, entrenched racial divisions, and the enduring influence of religious and nationalist ideologies dating back to the arrival of Dutch settlers in 1652.

To be sure, South Africa is a fascinating case-study in social and political history. But how about its religious story? Can confessional Protestantism in other parts of the world learn lessons from the political capture of the Christian confession in southern Africa?

Will churches and Christians take up the biblical mandate to contend for the faith (1 Tim. 6:12)? For law and Gospel? Our crucified creed? We cannot remain silent and faithful. We must speak up; choose our words carefully. Above all, the church must guard the "sword" of the Word, which issues forth from the mouth of a preacher (Rom. 10:5-21; 2nd Helvetic 18).

Words

Words are fundamental to human existence. Humans are creatures of divine words spoken. In turn, human beings create by using words, for better or for worse. Words are also a cry in response to the pain of suffering. Babies are born in blood, crying out of vulnerable exposure.

Here begins the journey of learning to speak a language that invites intimate attachment.⁶ Ideally, the child grows to trust their parents through a coherent exchange of words. Words form the basis for healthy development for membership in society that is filled with language. What does all this have to do with Christian creeds?⁷

Christians learn to commune with God through His Word. Scripture teaches believers how to speak truth about God and themselves, leading to spiritual intimacy and eternal life (2 Tim. 3:16-17; cf. BC 2). As in prayer, and as a kind of prayer, creeds are basic to Christian existence as covenantal creatures (Matt. 6:5-15; WCF 7).⁸

Central to the thesis of this book is that Christians learn to confess most readily *through pain*. Just as the Gospel has been established through suffering and death, Christian faith is baptism into Christ's sufferings (Col. 2:11-12). The Christian creed is both formative and cruciform: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2; cf. 15:3-11).

It may strike some readers as odd the notion that creeds and confessions should be used to shape the life of the church.⁹ Others may find the idea threatening to the authority of Scripture, evoking negative associations with Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy. Yet God's people have always been a confessing community. From Noah's

6. Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 37-40. In contrast to the language of information and motivation, primary language helps us express and develop our human condition.

7. "From the Latin *credo* ('I believe'), a creed is simply a summary of the church's faith. Sometimes *faith* is used in Scripture to refer to the faith that is believed (*fides quae creditur*, 1 Corinthians 16:13; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Ephesians 4:5; Colossians. 1:23; 2:7; 1 Timothy 4:1; 6:12; 2 Timothy 3:8; 4:7; 2 Peter 1:1; Jude 3), while elsewhere it refers to the act of believing – the faith by which we believe (*fides qua creditur*). In its essence, faith is not a subjective experience or decision but a knowledgeable assent to and belief in Jesus Christ as He gives Himself to us in the gospel"; see Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 215.

8. Peterson, *Answering God*, 13-16.

9. When I refer to the church, I have in mind the public gathering of the body of Christ for worship on the Lord's Day to receive Christ crucified through preaching and sacraments. In more confessional terms, I am referring to the institution that fulfills the Great Commission using the keys to the kingdom comprising office, Word and sacraments, and discipline; and in so doing manifests the three marks of a true church (Acts 2:42; Matt. 16; 18; 28; cf. HC LD 31; BC 27-35). This conception of the church is distinct from believers scattered in vocation throughout other institutions and communities in the world.

declaration of trust and the Hebraic *shema* to Peter's good confession and the creeds of Heidelberg, believers have formulated their faith. In every instance, these summations of trust in God's saving promises arise out of weakness, suffering, and death.

Covenant and Creeds

God's summons to confess in the crucible of life always come in the context of covenant that entails creeds. A brief snapshot of salvation history bears this out.

Creation

In the beginning, God created humankind in His image as creedal beings in a covenant relationship.¹⁰ As the enthroned Lord, God created by His Word and presided over His royal sanctuary with holy declarations (Gen. 1–2).¹¹ He addressed Adam with the conditions of the covenant (Gen. 1:28–31; 2:15–25). In turn, His first creature was to respond with obedience, in word and deed, lest he suffer the curse (Gen. 2:16–17). This, in a sense, was his creed by which to live. This covenant of works exchange constituted the foundation of humanity (Hos. 6:7; cf. WCF 7, 19).

In the establishment of this covenant at creation, it is the sovereign Lord who initiates and leads the conversation. Adam and Eve were to obey God's Word, placing them in a receptive position. When Adam speaks by naming Eve, he does so out of vocational obedience as God's under-ruler (Gen. 2:23). In this theocratic kingdom, everything was sacred; church and state were unified. As priestly kings and guardians, Adam and Eve were to fulfil the cultural mandate by exercising holy dominion over creation, being fruitful and multiplying (Gen. 1:28; 2:15).¹² Were they successful, they would have received heaven, signified and sealed in the Tree of Life (Gen. 3:24; WCF 4).

10. Simply put, a covenant is a relationship between two parties with legal aspects; see Michael G. Brown and Zachary Keele, *Sacred Bond: Covenant Theology Explored* (Middleville: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 2012), 5. See also Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Overland Park: Two Ages Press, 2000); out of the South African context, see Coppola, Antonio. *Faithful God: An Introduction to Covenant Theology*. Pretoria: Lig in Duisternis Uitgewers, 2023.

11. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 26–30.

12. Ibid., 62–90.

Fall

After the fall, responses to God's revelation come thick and fast. The first recorded words are Cain's murderous screed (Gen. 4:8). After Cain is spared civil justice and becomes a city builder, Lamech speaks words to a stricken conscience (Gen. 4:23-24). Lamech's lamentation is followed by Eve's naming of Seth, to replace the murdered Abel (Gen. 4:25). Foremost among the prediluvian Patriarchs is Noah. His oracular-creed in Genesis 9:24-27 curses the descendants of Canaan and blesses the descendants of Shem (cf. Heb. 11:4-7).

Old Testament

Among the postdiluvian Patriarchs, Abraham is most integral to the expansion of God's covenant of grace and spiritual polity. God calls Abraham, like Noah, to a pilgrimage of suffering.. He offers benediction and submission to God in Genesis 14:22-24 for victory in battle (cf. Heb. 11:8-12). As with Noah, Abraham's dark side is not glossed over (cf., e.g., Gen. 12:10-20). After God's people are constituted a nation, they testified to their faith in word and deed under the terms of the Old Covenant (Deut. 5:1-27). The Israelite creed ultimately turned upon the Messianic promise revealed through types and shadows, amidst idolatry and *exile* (1 Cor. 10; HC 6).¹³

New Testament

The New Covenant church replicates Abraham and Israel's sojourning confession.¹⁴ Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of heaven by word and

13. On the Sinai covenant being a temporal administration of God's gracious covenant with Abraham defined by a typological works principle, see Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 292-355; and Brown and Keele, *Sacred Bond*, 85-134.

14. The belief here concerns the unity of Scripture and its continuity between the Old and New Testaments in its administration of the covenant of grace. The canon of Scripture is a covenantal document. This is more readily apparent in terms of the structure of the Mosaic covenant as God adopted the legal-literary form of ANE suzerainty treaties for the expression and administration of His covenant with Israel; see 2 Corinthians 3:14; Meredith G. Kline, *Structure of Biblical Authority* (Oregon: Wipf Stock, 1997), 21-44. However, the New Testament is covenantal as well insofar as it represents the ratification of the covenant of grace, the Gospels and Acts serving as preambles to the introduction of the Messianic Lord (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:6). Canon is inherent to covenant, and covenant is the organizing principle to interpret canon; see Kline, *Structure of Biblical Authority*, 68-75; and Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 44-47.

deed – as the final Prophet, Priest, and King – in His suffering, death, and resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1-8). Christ brought the Old Testament order to fulfilment, thereby ratifying the New Covenant in His blood: the substance of the church’s creed (Matt. 5:17-20; BC 17-26). Jesus called His disciples to live out the Gospel in word and deed (Matt. 16:24-8). The Apostles filled out this confession further by closing the canon of the covenant of grace testifying to Christ crucified (1 Cor 3:10-11).¹⁵ This New Covenant charter for pilgrims closes Scripture’s testimony to the cross, which shapes church polity and faith in vocation (Rom. 12:1-2).¹⁶

Post-Apostolic church

The church’s post-Apostolic creeds, confessions, and catechisms grow out of the pattern of sound doctrine found in God’s Word (2 Tim. 1:13). Yet these “standards” are secondary to the ultimate *norm* of Scripture.¹⁷ The best of the early catholic, Protestant, and Reformed confessions extend the canonical tradition of Christ crucified for sinners. At the heart of the Heidelberg Catechism, there is the affirmation that “both the word and the sacraments” are “intended to focus our faith on the *sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross* as the only ground of salvation” (Q/A 67; *emphasis mine*). The church is a spiritual polity of heavenly wayfarers (Heb. 11:13-16; BC 31).

Yet, from ancient Canaan and first-century Corinth to Cape Town and Cape Cod, Satan has tempted sinners to exchange the creed of the cross for mystical speculation and political power.

15. Examples of Apostolic creedal formulas, found not only in the body of letters but also in opening salutations and benedictions, were intended to aid the transmission of the deposit of faith to future generations, and include, e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; Philippians 2:6-11; Colossians 1:15-20; 1 Timothy 1:15; 3:15-16. On the biblical precedent for creeds, see, e.g., Carl R. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), Chap. 3.

16. Creeds are necessary for both the being of the church and well-being of the church; see John Fesko, *The Need for Creeds Today: Confessional Faith in a Faithless Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 14. On the usefulness of the creeds and confessions, see also Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative*, Chap. 6.

17. While such summary statements of faith are inevitable and necessary to the church, they are nevertheless provisional and subject to correction; see R. Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2008), 153-91.