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Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

We are a confessional church. That means that we hold to certain creeds and confessions as faithful summaries of what the Bible teaches. The word ‘creed’ comes from the Latin word *credo*. *Credo* means “I believe.” But when you say ‘we believe’ in Latin, it is *credimus*. And the word ‘confess’ comes from the Latin word *Confiteo*. *Confiteo* means ‘I confess.’ But when you say ‘we confess’ in Latin, it is *confitemur*. So if we were reading the Belgic Confession in Latin, it would have the words *credimus et confitemur*, ‘we believe and we confess’ at the beginning of this article.

So as a confessional church, while we believe that the Bible alone is the authoritative and inspired Word of God, we have adopted three creeds (Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian) and four confessions of faith (Heidelberg, Canons, Belgic, and Westminster) as faithful summaries of what the Bible teaches; we have adopted written summaries of what we believe the Bible teaches and we publicly *confess* these things to be true.

The question is: Why? If we have the Bible, why do we give so much time and attention to these creeds and confessions? Why are they what we use to teach our children for 6-7 years? Why do we recite a creed almost every Sunday? Why is it that one of our Sunday sermons is usually preached in connection with a confession article? Why are the creeds and confessions part of the basis of membership in our church? So in short, **WHY ARE WE A CHURCH OF CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS?** This is the main question we want to consider today.

I. And we will begin to do this from our passage in **Judges**.

- A. The Book of Judges records the period of Israel’s history between their arrival in the Promised Land and when they began to be ruled by Kings. So between approximately 1350BC and 1050BC, they were ruled by Judges.
1. It was a particularly evil period in Israel’s history and the further you get into the Book of Judges the more immoral and unjust and idolatrous the people become.
  2. **Two refrains** or summary statements are repeated throughout the book; they are “*in those days every man did what was right in his own eyes*” and “*in those days there was no king in Israel.*” The Book of Judges was written when there was a King in Israel, possibly somewhere around the time when David was king. And what those summary statements infer is that a king like David would not have allowed this wickedness to happen.
  3. Our passage comes early in the Book of Judges. It functions as a kind of **foretaste of the cycle that will be repeated again and again in Judges**. That cycle is that a period of good behaviour is followed by a period of bad behaviour, which brings down the

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judgment of the Lord on the people by way of invasion and/or famine, which is then followed by the people crying out to the Lord and Him delivering them under the leadership of one of the Judges.

4. So here in ch. 2, we read about the **death of Joshua**. We are told in v7 that he had led the people into the Promised Land and he was a very faithful leader of the people, as were the elders who outlived him. And while Joshua and those elders led the people, they “*served the Lord.*”
5. Now, what is about Joshua and the elders who outlived him that receives special attention in v7? It is that they “*had seen the great work that the Lord had done for Israel.*” You see, back in **Deuteronomy 6**, parents, and especially fathers, as heads of their households, were commanded to teach their children about God and about His great works of creation and deliverance, every day. The priest and Levites also were instructed to teach the people the law of God (**Leviticus 10:11**), which included the record of God’s great works on behalf of His people. So while Joshua and the elders who outlived him were alive, it is clear that the people were being taught about the things that Joshua and the elders had seen the Lord do.
6. However, as we come to v10, we learn that just one generation later, a generation arose that “*did not know the Lord nor the work He had done for Israel.*” And we can easily infer from these words that the reason this generation did not know the Lord or what He had done for Israel is because the parents and priests *failed to teach them*. There was no round the dinner table instruction, there was no preaching, there were no catechism classes, there was no memory work, there were no Bible studies, there were no church history lessons, and whatever was taught was undone by the hypocrisy of the parents and teachers who *said* one thing but *did* another. In short, there was no believing and confessing.

B. I want us to look at a kind of parallel passage to this one, which we find in **Hosea 4:1-6** (p. 752). Here we find a complaint of the Lord about Israel. He says,

*Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel, for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land; <sup>2</sup> there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. <sup>3</sup> Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea are taken away. <sup>4</sup> Yet let no one contend, and let none accuse, for with you is my contention, O priest. <sup>5</sup> You shall stumble by day; the prophet also shall stumble with you by night; and I will destroy your mother. <sup>6</sup> My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest*

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*to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.*

So, why was there no faithfulness or steadfast love among the people? Why was there swearing and lying and stealing, etc? It was because the people had not been taught about God and His great works on behalf of His people.

- C. Perhaps you have heard this saying before: The first generation DOES what it does and knows WHY it does it. The second generation just DOES what it does but it does not know WHY. And so, the third generation does not DO. Congregation, this is the message of Judges 2 and Hosea 4 (and Deut. 6). We must teach our children *WHO* to believe in, *WHAT* He has done, and *WHY* we do what we do.
- D. And we are ***New Testament believers!*** We know that God created all things through the Lord Jesus and that they were created for Him. We know that the ram that substituted for Isaac on the sacrificial altar was pointing to Jesus who would become our substitute sacrifice. We know that the rescue of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt was pointing forward to our rescue from slavery to sin by the blood of Jesus. We know that the Promised Land was pointing forward to the greater promised land of heaven! We have even more reason than the believers of OT times to tell the next generation about who our Triune God is, to tell them about the great salvation that we have in the Lord Jesus Christ, and to tell them about what the church is, how the church is to function, and how we must live as citizens of the kingdom of Christ.
- II. So, how do we do this? Again, if the Bible alone is the inspired and authoritative word of God that is *“useful for teaching and rebuking and correction and training in righteousness,”* as we see in **2 Tim. 3:16**, is there a place for creeds and confessions?
- A. Well, let’s continue to think about this as we turn back to our earlier reading from **1 Timothy 3:14-16** (p.992).
1. The Apostle Paul was writing to Timothy who was the minister of the congregation at Ephesus. There were issues in the church there that needed addressing.
  2. But look at the glorious description of the church in v5 – it is *“the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth.”*
    - If you look under a lot of NZ homes, you will see that the house is built on what are called **piles**. The piles are very strong wooden or concrete posts that are buried deep in the ground. On top of the piles are strong wooden bearers. And together the piles and bearers support the whole house structure. So the image here in 1 Timothy 3:15 is of the church being the piles and bearers that support the truth. The church has the task of making the truth known and upholding it before the world.

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3. And in order to do this, the church has been given the Holy Spirit, who, as we learned last week, is the Spirit of truth.
  4. And this is important because the Bible does not contain neat and tidy answers to every question that ever arises. Sometimes there are very clear commands, but at other times, we have to consider several biblical principles to the matter at hand; or the flow of biblical theology from OT to NT, or how to apply biblical principle in a given situation. And we rely on the work of the Holy Spirit to do this. And the Spirit of truth has been active in the church to do this in every generation of the church’s existence.
  5. We have **an example of this in v16** . Does your Bible have most of the words of v16 set out in a different style than the verses around it? Most Bibles set the words of this verse in a different style to the verses around it. And this is because it is believed that these words functioned as a very early creed in the NT church. The words there are a kind of poetic summary of the person and work of the Lord Jesus. They begin with words that speak about His being born as a human and they go through to words that speak about His ascension into heaven. And of these words, the ESV says “*we confess*” them. The NIV says, They “*are beyond all question.*” The NAU says, They are our “*common confession.*” The idea is that there was no debate about these things in the church; they were believed and confessed by the whole church.
  6. And it is the same today with our creeds – they are summaries of biblical truth held in common by the whole church.
- B. But we have a biblical example of this also in relation to our confessions, which go into a lot more detail about doctrine and practice. And this example is in **Acts 15**. We learn there that some men had been teaching in the church that unless you were circumcised, you could not be saved. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed to go to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders so that this matter could be discussed. This meeting is often spoken about as the first church synod. So after debate and discussion, the ruling of the church was that that teaching was contrary to the gospel and wrong. So the conclusions of the meeting were written down and several men were commissioned to visit the churches and read out the judgment of the church. And we are told, “*When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.*” This early ‘type’ of confessional instruction was received with joy by the congregations because it promoted and supported unity in the truth!
1. And this was certainly not the last controversy that the church had to deal with.
    - Very soon, there were the **great controversies about the Trinity**, and especially the person and work of the Lord Jesus that arose through heretics like Sabellius and Arius.

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- And of course, the **Reformation** was about important doctrines like Scripture alone and Christ alone and grace alone, and there was now the Roman Catholic church and the Protestant church. There were great debates about the Lord’s Supper and baptism. And the church had to come together and discuss these things and write down its judgments and reflections.
  - This is why **Rev. J. Ligon Duncan said**, “The church has had 2000 years of rich reflections on what the church is supposed to be and do. And we are not wise to ignore the great Protestant confessions.” They represent the life and labour of believers who were filled with the Spirit of God and who spent their lives pouring over Scripture. To toss them out as irrelevant and not necessary is to deny that the Holy Spirit has been at work in the church these 2000 years.
  - You know, I couldn’t begin to count the times that I have been in Bible studies or private conversations where a topic has come up and I have been reminded of Lord’s Day X or Article Y, where there is a helpful answer with Scripture references readily at hand. And of course, today, I can quickly look them up via the app on my phone!
  - It is most helpful that we confess what we believe *as a church*.
  - It is right that we use these documents to teach the next generation because they are the creeds and confessions *of the church!*
  - And although they are not a guarantee of faithfulness, it ought to be that if we move to another town or country we make it a priority to be a part of a confessional church.

Well, by way of conclusion, one of the sad realities of our times is that it is virtually impossible to call the world-wide church together to discuss the pressing issues of our day. When our confessions, like the Belgic and Westminster, were composed, what was said about creation was that God created everything out of nothing in the space of six days, and what was said about sex was that God created male and female in his image. The church fathers of those times simply could not conceive of the types of debates that exist today, *inside the church*, let alone out there in the world! So there have been attempts by various churches and individuals and para-church organisations to write down what the Bible says about these matters. One example that I have told you about before is **the Nashville Statement**. It was put together in the form of a confession to help teach the next generation and to declare to the world the good purposes of God for human sexuality as revealed in the Bible. I would commend it to your reflection. It has no official standing in the church but if you want answers to the questions your work colleagues and fellow students and family members and neighbours are asking about, you will be greatly helped by that document.

I am sure you have heard it said before that those who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them. So let's learn the lesson of Judges 2 and Hosea 4, and make use of the creeds and confessions of the church of Christ!    Amen.