

INTRODUCTION

WHY A COURSE ON THE BELGIC CONFESSION?

1. GOD'S COVENANT PROMISES AND PROFESSION OF FAITH

In His mercy God established His covenant with each one of us. Without any asking on our part, God reached out to each of us and said "You are mine." Within this covenant, God gave us promises which can be found summarised in the "Form for Baptism" (*Book of Praise*, pg 584). These promises are very **personal** promises for each one of God's children. In order to let this fact be impressed upon us, we do well to read these promises in the first person:

1. *"When I was baptized into the Name of the Father, God the Father testifies and seals to **me** that He establishes an eternal covenant of grace with **me**. He adopts **me** as His child and heir, and promises to provide **me** with all good and avert all evil or turn it to my benefit."* (This means that before I even took my first breath, when all I had done was fall into sin together with Adam and Eve, God the Father said to me, "You are Mine, I will care for you in the way that is best for you.")
2. *"When I am baptized into the Name of the Son, God the Son promises **me** that He washes **me** in His blood from all **my** sins and unites **me** with Him in His death and resurrection. Thus I am freed from **my** sins and accounted righteous before God."* (God the Son promised to make me clean, and to forgive all my sins: those committed both consciously and unconsciously.)
3. *"When I am baptized into the Name of the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit assures **me** by this sacrament that He will dwell in **me** and make **me** a living member of Christ, imparting to **me** what I have in Christ, namely the cleansing from **my** sins and the daily renewal of **my** life, till I shall finally be presented without blemish among the assembly of God's elect in life eternal."* That is: God the Holy Spirit recreates me. When I was dead in sin, He made me alive again so that I could live for Him.

PROFESSION OF FAITH: A RESPONSE TO BAPTISM

We never asked God for anything of the above, nor did He offer it to us. No, God **imposed** these rich promises upon us. We must each ask of ourselves, "What is my response to this? Am I indifferent to it all? Do I simply reject it? It is hardly possible for me to do so! For if God has given me such wealth, my response must be one of excitement. It cannot leave me cold! I've **got to be excited** that He wants to, does, and will continue to, deal with me in a way that is best for me." It is our responsibility to respond to the covenant God sealed with us at our baptism by way of profession of faith. Our response, our profession of faith, is to say to God, "Yes Lord, I believe what You said. I love You because You have made me Your child, because You care for me, because You forgive my sins, because You have renewed me. I want to live as Your child." Hence profession of faith is nothing other than a response to baptism.

To know why one should make profession of faith is one thing, but the motivation for making profession of faith is quite another. Was our profession of faith so many years ago an enthusiastic response to God's promises? Or was it simply the expected thing to do? No matter what, as attendees at post-confession class, the issue is that we **have made** profession of faith. We have stood before the Lord and His church and confessed that we love Him, believe all He has said in His Word, and will serve Him. Irrespective of our motives at the time, we swore an oath to love God and serve him, and we are bound to it. We now all have a task in His Kingdom, be it as a parent, as a member of His church, as a carpenter, etc. We all have a task, and we are to do our tasks as persons who have made profession of faith; as persons to whom God has said, "You are mine. I have made my covenant with you."

PROFESSION OF FAITH: ITS IMPACT ON DAILY LIFE

We should each reflect on the following: What does profession of faith mean concretely for my life today? It means this, that my enthusiasm, my excitement on account of God's promises to me, **remains** even today. It means I want to serve Him eagerly, living out of the riches He gave. Profession of faith was not a 'once off' event, nor is it merely my passport to the Lord's Supper, but it means rather that I live today in a way consistent with what I professed so long ago. My professing the faith **impacts** the way I live **now**.

Psalm 119: 97-112 captures David's **enthusiasm** for his God and the promises of His God. "*Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day*" (vs 97). "*How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!*" (vs 103). David is in love with God's law. The result of his rapture is that God's law is his meditation all the day. He compares God's law to honey; in fact, he states that God's law is even better than honey; sweeter. Why does he think so? Because he understood the riches God gave to him. This didn't leave him cold, but rather, he was rapt in it. He busied himself with God's Word. This enthusiasm will spill over into our appreciation of the Bible so that we take it off the shelf and study it, eagerly.

2. CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS

A creed is a 'short' statement of faith. God has given us the Bible, and in it revealed all He wishes us to know about the covenant He made with each one of us. The Bible is the source of our life. It is because of what the Bible is that David can say "I love Your Word." Just as David responded to the Bible with appreciation, so we too -given it's content- are to respond to it by saying, "yes, I believe it; my response to what God says in it is that I accept it as true."

What is it that is accepted as true? What is it that we believe? THE BIBLE, which contains various doctrines: doctrines of creation, redemption, the Church, election, etc. These are all teachings which God has given to us. The statements "I believe that God created the heavens and the earth," or "I believe that Jesus Christ was born of the virgin Mary" are **creeds: responses to God's Word**. More specifically, a creed is a short statement of MY FAITH, a statement of what I believe. A creed is PERSONAL.

The Free Reformed Churches of Australia have a total of six creeds, which can be subdivided as follows:

<u>ECUMENICAL CREEDS</u>	<u>REFORMATIONAL CREEDS</u>
- dating from the first centuries, apprx. 200 - 600 A.D.	- dating from the time of the Reformation
- embraced by all the churches of the western world at that time (Europe)	- adopted by the reformed churches of the Reformation
a) The Apostles' Creed	a) The Belgic Confession (1561)
b) The Nicene Creed	b) The Heidelberg Catechism (1563)
c) The Athanasian Creed	c) The Canons of Dort (1618-1619)

The **creeds** are not theological treatises, but **personal statements of faith**. Even though we as individuals did not write them, we can still call them our own, because they are **accurate** summaries of the Bible. The Bible does not change and its meaning does not change. Therefore, if another person centuries ago has summarized the Bible accurately in his creeds, there is no reason why we cannot use his words to confess our faith today. We can as it were place our signature under each creed, stating thereby that it is 'my confession of what God has done for me.'

THE PURPOSE OF THE CREEDS

Creeds are valued differently by various groups:

1. 'A creed is an infallible decree.' It is to be accepted without any question. This is a distinctive view of the Roman Catholic Church. The Pope makes decrees, and one must simply agree.

Refutation: This is an incorrect view, for creeds are written by man. Since the Bible alone is infallible, man's response, a creed, is **not** infallible. Man is a sinner, and therefore no-one may attach the same authority to any of the creeds as to the Bible.

2. 'A creed is an iron chain.' It is something that ties you down. This description is typical of the Anabaptists at the time of the Reformation who discarded all as being too restrictive. The Anabaptists want to leave room for the Holy Spirit to speak truth in one's heart, and one's heart must therefore at all times be open for what the Spirit may yet have to say.

Refutation: The Spirit does not give any new revelation to us. The creeds echo the Word of God, and therefore are no more restrictive than the Bible itself is.

3. 'A creed is a sign-post.' This is said in particular by the Arminians who claim that creeds reflect the personal faith of the author. So a creed has historical value in telling us what persons of a previous generation believed. We for our part should remain free to decide what we wish to believe today.

Refutation: The Arminians detract from the value of the creeds. To say that they are only of historical value is to say that the truth can keep changing. But the truth does not change. We today may stand on the shoulders of the understanding the fathers gained into Scripture, and confess their faith with them.

4. **A creed is an echo of what the Scriptures teach:** a summary which **repeats** what Scripture says. That gives a creed immense value. If a statement states accurately what the Bible says, it certainly is worthwhile. This is a correct view on the purpose of the creeds.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE CREEDS

Creeds have "derived" authority or secondary authority. Having been written by man, they **are** subject to error. The creeds do not have any authority because of what they themselves are, but because they capture accurately what the Bible says.

THE FUNCTION OF THE CREEDS

1 Tim. 3:15 *"but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth."* Note here the word **pillar**; examples of pillars we are familiar with include street lights and power poles, both of which are popularly used as bulletin boards for local announcements. The church functions as a bulletin board in the world, a bill board to announce the truth, to proclaim to the world what the Bible is all about. This function of the Church can be perceived as:

1. **Stating** the truth: e.g. the Belgic Confession. At the time Guido de Bres wrote it, the Church was being persecuted. De Bres wanted to point out that the Church was not a group of fanaticists, but merely believed what was written in the Bible.
2. Preparing a **defense** against heresies: e.g. the Canons of Dort, which presented the truth of God's Word in the face of prevailing heresies at the time.
3. Serving as a **teaching aid** for the uninformed: e.g. the Heidelberg Catechism, which was written at the request of Elector Frederick III of the Palatinate, because of his concern that his subjects did not know the faith.
4. **Expressing** together the **unity of faith**: The three Forms of Unity (that is: the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort) present the world with a statement of what we *together* believe.

THE BIBLE IN ITS ENTIRETY

Why be busy with the **whole** Word of God? Why get so involved with **all of it**, and then not just once but **repeatedly**? The motivation for doing so is:

1. **A love for the Lord**, instils a desire to be busy with **all** He says: Ps 119:97,103.

2. **The will of God** for each of His children is to be busy with what He has said:

1. Lord's Day 7, Q&A 22: A Christian must believe **all** that is promised in the gospel.

2. Lord's Day 23, Q&A 59: the benefit of believing **all** this (i.e. the content of Lord's Days 8-22, which in turn contain a summary of the whole Scripture) is that one is righteous before God.

3. Mat. 28:19,20: Jesus instructs His disciples to teach **all** things He commanded them; no apostle could pick and choose what he would teach his converts.

4. John 20:30,31: **these** are written (i.e. chapters 1-20). **All** the doctrines that Jesus spoke about were necessary for John's readers to believe that Jesus is the Christ and so receive salvation. No one is at liberty to delete or minimize any chapter or verse of what John has written.

5. Deut. 5:31-33: verse 31 speaks of **all the commandments**. Moses had to teach the laws concerning the feasts, cleanliness, sacrifices. The doctrines of sin, redemption, depravity, election etc were all embodied in these laws. God instructed Moses to teach them **all**, and insist that the people not turn to the right or left of anything God has revealed.

The conclusion is that God does not wish any one to take any liberties with any doctrines; God says they are **all** important to **everyone**.

GETTING DOCTRINE RIGHT IS THE KEY TO GETTING ALL OF LIFE RIGHT!

Underneath daily practise lies doctrine. For example, one's choice of a marriage partner is not only an emotional matter, but at heart a doctrinal issue. God has ordained that marriage reflect the unity that exists between Christ and His Church. Such close unity cannot exist between a believer and an unbeliever. Further, the doctrine of the covenant involves that God entrusts His covenant children into the care of believing parents, so that these parents might in turn teach God's children His ways. If God's children are to be instructed in the ways of all His commandments, can a believer do this together with an unbeliever? Right doctrine produces right ethics. Right doctrine determines the way one lives. If one errs in doctrine, this will be evident in his life, and vice versa. Many of Paul's letters can be divided into two parts: the first part is devoted to doctrine, and the second to the practice resulting from this doctrine.

So why study the Belgic Confession at post-confession class? The Belgic Confession contains many doctrines. **Getting doctrine right is the key to getting life right!**
