



The Reformed Confessional Quadrilateral and the Reformed Confession

The Reformed Confessional Quadrilateral

Of the Reformed confessional writers, Barth asks the question:

What were they seeking to emphasize, what was their basic intention when, instead of simply repeating the Apostle's Creed, instead of acknowledging the Augsburg Confession (as many of them did do), they set out to compose their own confessions, to express the great commonality of Christian thought in a Reformed formulation by making very definite selections, intentional deletions, delimitations, clarifications, and even blurrings? To ask the question from the perspective of the principle of Scripture: What was the faithful echo that these confessional documents intentionally sought to give to the voice of God heard in the Bible?

Historical Evaluation: To Barth there are four distinctive markers for the development of the Reformed confessions historically.

1 Ecumenical

The first historical consideration of the Reformed confession, therefore, has an *ecumenical* concern, as it seeks to ground Christian truth within the theology of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

2 Particular

The second consideration gives attention to the *particularity* of the gathered Reformed congregation of confessors, articulating what is to be preached, taught, and lived in this local community of faith.

3 Defined

The third consideration provides confessional *definition*, stating what aspects of the confession must not be compromised as Christian dogma.

4 Provisional

The fourth consideration acknowledges a *provisionality* to the confessional task, as the confessing community corrects, revises or reaffirms confessional statements in light of Scripture.

Defining Reformed Confessionalism

The Definition of a Reformed Creed/Confession

The following is a definition offered by Karl Barth in his address in his 1925 address “Universal Reformed Creed”:

A Reformed Creed is the statement, spontaneously and publicly formulated by a Christian community within a geographically limited area, which, until further action, defines its character to outsiders; and which, until further action, gives guidance for its own doctrine and life; it is a formulation of the insight currently given to the whole Christian Church by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, witnessed to by the Holy Scriptures alone.

Each line in this definition is carefully considered and defined for this ecclesiastical audience, as Barth dedicates nine further points of explanation to describe the importance of this dogmatic definition of the Reformed creed. The following is my summary of that discussion.

Christ-Centered [1]

First, the Reformed creed is committed to confessing the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the one thing that makes all Christian creeds and confessions distinctively Christian.

Scripture Principle [2]

Second, the Reformed creed’s commitment to the Scripture principle alone begins to differentiate the Protestant creedal statement from the Catholic position (which add the authorities of tradition and office of the vicar of Christ), as well as varying modern Christian positions, including Christian sects (which adds the revelation of history, the voice of reason and culture, and varying religious experience).

Illumination of the Holy Spirit [3]

Third, the Reformed creed’s commitment to Scripture requires the illumination of the Holy Spirit in order for an “insight” from Scripture to be properly understood, proclaimed, and received by the church.

Insight given to the Universal Christian Church [4]

Fourth, the Reformed creed must also defend and winsomely state the theological “insight” of which the entire Christian church must be a steward, and therefore, in its confessional statements, be the “voice of the One Holy Church.” In this sense, its primary interest is not defining a specifically Reformed identity but rather what Scripture rightly teaches.

Insight given to the Local Christian Church [5]

Fifth, the Reformed creed understands its task as confessing theological “insight given for the moment,” an insight that Barth characterized as *dogma*—a third category subordinate to the witness of Holy Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Confession for the Present Moment [6]

“Until further,” understood presently, allows the community to theologically define itself now and in this way—its life, its doctrine, its communal practices—for itself as well as for the outside world. Additionally, “until further,” understood temporally, acknowledges that the Reformed creed is not a finished confession.

As Barth writes: “From the beginning, the Reformed Church has treated its creeds as open to discussion and improvement, as liable to be superseded.” The dogma of the Reformed church is never fully settled once and for all. Rather, it is a continual process of confessing once again what Scripture rightly teaches and this gives the Reformed confessional task a certain “mobility” that carries both strengths and weaknesses.

Confession as a Humble Church [7]

Seventh, the Reformed creed rejects ecclesiastical triumphalism which attempts to attach enduring universal significance to its confessions. It would be, for Barth, dangerous for the Reformed to fall to the temptation to view the Heidelberg or Dort confessional statements as “inspired”—making such documents *de facto* Reformed symbols.

Confession in, with and for the church [8]

Eighth, the Reformed creed is usually formulated in an open process of communal participation and voting, intending to speak for a certain people in a particular geographical area. Those who worship together are the voice of the shared confession. This geographic concentration of the individual church does not eliminate the value of a regional synod in the pursuit of a particular confessional consensus, yet such a synod must understand itself as nothing more than the “commissioned voice of the Reformed community,” particularly at the congregational level.

Confessing Doctrine and Life [9]

Ninth, the Reformed creed gives practical consideration to the necessary confessional definition for those inside and outside the community. In this sense, Reformed confessional articulation has a bold clarity that defines in confessional form the community’s “doctrine *and* life.” Barth writes:

Such creeds were thought of not only and in many cases not primarily as theological ordinances for the Church; they were conceived in the consciousness of the mission of the Church to those outside who were surrounded by a Christianity which had fallen into error. . . . The doctrine, the proclamation of Christian truth among the Reformed . . . included the essentials for [individual] lives in society and in the State. In fact, it sets forth the problem of ethics radically in every line.

Barth’s nine points of extended commentary on his own definition of the Reformed creed are an expansion upon his earlier historical observation of the four main reasons for the emergence of the Reformed creeds and confessions. In fact, these points of commentary do not depart from and are congruent to those categories.

The Reformed Confessional Quadrilateral in the Definition

The Reformed confession is *ecumenical* in that it must provide continuity with the confession of the church universal in its confession of Jesus Christ, particularly engaging with its ancient symbols (points 1, 4).

The Reformed confession is *particular* in that it emerges in a specific, geographic context for a local church or group of churches needing theological clarity and ethical consistency (points 8, 9).

The Reformed confession is *defined* in that it clearly states what it confesses to be true by adhering to the Scripture principle while also challenging ecclesiastical triumphalism, defending the necessary humility of a church that recognizes that though it is not secure or pure it must still make its confession (points 2, 3, 7).

The Reformed confession is *provisional* as it is a constant re-articulation of confessional truths, discerning anew what is confessionally essential and non-essential as it remains faithful to Scripture (points 5, 6).

Source:

Onsager, Troy. *One Church In Christ: The Confessional Foundations of Ecclesiastical Unity in Karl Barth 1921-38*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2023. (Introduction, also pages 27-35)