

The Creeds of the Church

Session 12—The History of the Confessional Statement of The Gospel Coalition

The Gospel Coalition's Confessional Statement is a good document to wrap up this series on the creeds of the church for two reasons. **First**, it is recent—The Gospel Coalition was formed in 2005 and they published their Confessional Statement in 2010. **Second**, it is broad in its scope—it was specifically designed to be interdenominational, while still being specific enough in some particulars to provide structure for fellowship.

I. Historical Background

A. Factors contributing to the perceived need for The Gospel Coalition

1. Relativism on the theological left

Just as the Chicago Council on Biblical Inerrancy was born, in large part, out of response to the growing threat of theological and moral relativism, so The Gospel Coalition coalesced around a commitment to combatting relativism in the church. To this end, the resultant Confessional Statement combats such things as open theism, postmodern deconstructionism, & morally relativistic views of sexuality.

2. Fundamentalism on the theological right

Another impetus for the formation of the Coalition was the perception of the undue influence of pastors who represented a predominantly political message rather than a gospel message. As John Piper remembers the early stages of the formation of the Coalition, he tells of a letter he received, written by D.A. Carson (and signed by both Carson and Tim Keller):

...[H]e said that he was concerned that the voice of evangelicalism was often defined by the margins, by voices that were on the periphery of the gospel—very powerful voices, voices with huge churches and huge movements, but when they spoke they didn't speak from the center. The cross didn't seem to be the center, the Bible didn't seem to be the center, the gospel of Christ crucified for sinners and risen didn't seem to be the energy that was driving the movement or the church.

Although no specific pastors or organizations are mentioned at this point, it is not hard to read between the lines of their stated concern. In 2002, when Carson and Keller first started meeting together and brainstorming about these things, evangelicalism was less identified with people like Harold John Ockenga, Harold Lindsell, Billy Graham, John Stott, and Martin Lloyd-Jones and more identified with people like Jerry Falwell, Jimmy Swaggart, Chuck Swindoll, Pat Robertson, James Dobson, and others, as well as by their respective organizations—The Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition, etc.

So TGC was formed to resist influences from both ends of the theological spectrum (relativism from the left and fundamentalism from the right).

B. The Origins of the Coalition

1. Seeds of the Coalition

D.A. Carson and Tim Keller started meeting together in 2002 to discuss their concerns about the direction of evangelicalism (or, at least, the public perceptions related to evangelicalism). Their private conversations grew in 2004 into a meeting of 40 pastors who met together to talk and pray about this subject on a yearly basis.

2. The first meetings

The earliest meetings of this “pastors’ colloquium” (as Carson called it) were originally for the purpose of mutual encouragement, accountability, and prayer. They also began talking about the potential benefit of a broader movement which would have as its purpose the re-centering of evangelicalism around the gospel itself, rather than its perceived political or moral implications. They originally proposed accomplishing this re-centering by hosting pastors’ conferences.

For the first few years, this group worked on developing its foundational documents. Then, in 2007, they held their first public conference, at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. This conference was attended by some 600 pastors (despite the lack of advertising). Most of these attendees were under the age of 40.

II. The Gospel Coalition Today

A. Current foci

In 2009, The Gospel Coalition moved its biennial conference to Chicago, in order to handle the growing number of attendees. They also began to shift their focus from conferences to providing free resources of various kinds through their website.

B. Current influence

Currently, TGC focuses on several ongoing projects:

1. The TGC website—over 20 million viewers per year, publishing books, articles, sermons, and conference materials for personal edification
2. International Outreach—providing free theological resources to pastors overseas (850,000 books and other resources to pastors in 130 countries and 38 languages, since 2006)
3. The New City Catechism—a teaching resources for adults and children
4. Regional chapters—local pastors groups that meet for encouragement
5. *Themelios*—a theological journal

Although nothing explicit exists to this effect, TGC seems to have a symbiotic relationship with Together for the Gospel (T4G). Their national conferences meet in complementary years and there is a huge overlap in their leadership. Both groups seek to re-prioritize the gospel as the center of Christian faith and practice.

III. Issues specifically addressed by The Confessional Statement

The Confessional Statement of The Gospel Coalition does not break new ground theologically, but rather it re-iterates the historic, biblical doctrines of the Christian church, clarifying several matters of current import, and providing a basis for partnership in fulfilling TGC's purpose.

The Confession covers the following 13 topics:

1. The identity and nature of God
2. The nature of Scripture
3. Creation
4. The Fall of humanity
5. God's work of election
6. The nature of the gospel
7. The redemptive work of Christ (the message of the gospel)
8. The justifying effect of Christ's work (the ramifications of the gospel)
9. The redemptive work of the Holy Spirit (the application of the gospel)
10. The "already-not yet" nature of God's Kingdom (inaugurated eschatology)
11. The nature of the church
12. Baptism and the Lord's Supper
13. The nature of the Consummation