

## The Creeds of the Church

Session 13—The Theology of the Confessional Statement of The Gospel Coalition

### **I. Review**

- A. 2 reasons to study the Confessional Statement of The Gospel Coalition:
  - 1. It is recent—The Gospel Coalition was formed in 2005 and they published their Confessional Statement in 2010.
  - 2. 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.
- B. TGC was formed partly to reject the moral and theological relativism coming from the left of western Christianity (mainline Protestantism) and partly to correct the non-gospel focus coming from the right of western Christianity (Fundamentalism). Their often-repeated goal was (and is) “to renew the modern church in the ancient gospel of Jesus Christ.”

### **II. 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 Tri-une God***

*We believe in one God, eternally existing in three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who know, love, and glorify one another. This one true and living God is infinitely perfect both in his love and in his holiness. He is the Creator of all things, visible and invisible, and is therefore worthy to receive all glory and adoration. Immortal and eternal, he perfectly and exhaustively knows the end from the beginning, sustains and sovereignly rules over all things, and providentially brings about his eternal good purposes to redeem a people for himself and restore his fallen creation, to the praise of his glorious grace.*

The statement begins on fairly ecumenical grounds, affirming the ancient doctrines expressed previously in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. Even the opening line, “We believe in one God...” signals their adherence to Nicene Christianity. They also defy Open Theism with their statement that God “perfectly and exhaustively knows the end from the beginning.” A careful reader might also discern the first salvos of their Reformed doctrines in the particular language of God’s “sovereignly ruling all things, and providentially bringing about his eternal good purposes to redeem a people.”

#### ***Revelation***

*God has graciously disclosed his existence and power in the created order, and has supremely revealed himself to fallen human beings in the person of his Son, the incarnate Word. Moreover, this God is a speaking God who by his Spirit has graciously disclosed himself in human words: we believe that God has inspired the words preserved in the Scriptures, the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, which are both record and means of his saving work in the world.*

*These writings alone constitute the verbally inspired Word of God, which is utterly authoritative and without error in the original writings, complete in its revelation of his will for salvation, sufficient for all that God requires us to believe and do, and final in its authority over every domain of knowledge to which it speaks. We confess that both our finitude and our sinfulness preclude the possibility of knowing God's truth exhaustively, but we affirm that, enlightened by the Spirit of God, we can know God's revealed truth truly. The Bible is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it teaches; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; and trusted, as God's pledge, in all that it promises. As God's people hear, believe, and do the Word, they are equipped as disciples of Christ and witnesses to the gospel.*

Article 2 jumps right into the debate about the nature of the Bible. We can see the legacy of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy in the principles expressed here. This statement admits the finitude, fallenness, and insufficiency of human minds and language, but simultaneously asserts the inerrancy, sufficiency, and authority of the written Word of God.

### ***Creation of Humanity***

*We believe that God created human beings, male and female, in his own image. Adam and Eve belonged to the created order that God himself declared to be very good, serving as God's agents to care for, manage, and govern creation, living in holy and devoted fellowship with their Maker. Men and women, equally made in the image of God, enjoy equal access to God by faith in Christ Jesus and are both called to move beyond passive self-indulgence to significant private and public engagement in family, church, and civic life. Adam and Eve were made to complement each other in a one-flesh union that establishes the only normative pattern of sexual relations for men and women, such that marriage ultimately serves as a type of the union between Christ and his church. In God's wise purposes, men and women are not simply interchangeable, but rather they complement each other in mutually enriching ways. God ordains that they assume distinctive roles which reflect the loving relationship between Christ and the church, the husband exercising headship in a way that displays the caring, sacrificial love of Christ, and the wife submitting to her husband in a way that models the love of the church for her Lord. In the ministry of the church, both men and women are encouraged to serve Christ and to be developed to their full potential in the manifold ministries of the people of God. The distinctive leadership role within the church given to qualified men is grounded in creation, fall, and redemption and must not be sidelined by appeals to cultural developments.*

Without taking a stand on the precise mechanism of creation, Article 3 asserts the creation act of God and proceeds to define the complementarian stance of TGC. This article effectively precludes any morally relativistic sexual ethics (including, by implication, all extra-marital heterosexual activity and all homosexual activity). It also rejects egalitarianism—the position that men and women are not just inherently equal before God but functionally interchangeable.

### ***The Fall***

*We believe that Adam, made in the image of God, distorted that image and forfeited his original blessedness—for himself and all his progeny—by falling into sin through Satan's temptation. As a result, all human beings are alienated from God, corrupted in every aspect of their being (e.g., physically, mentally, volitionally, emotionally, spiritually) and condemned finally and irrevocably to death—apart from God's own gracious intervention. The supreme need of all*

*human beings is to be reconciled to the God under whose just and holy wrath we stand; the only hope of all human beings is the undeserved love of this same God, who alone can rescue us and restore us to himself.*

Article 4 describes the Fall of humanity as being total—“in every aspect of their being (e.g., physically, mentally, volitionally, emotionally, spiritually)” —which rejects any semi-Pelagian understanding of salvation (the notion that humans can, in their own strength, turn to God in repentance, without the intervention of the Holy Spirit).

### ***The Plan of God***

*We believe that from all eternity God determined in grace to save a great multitude of guilty sinners from every tribe and language and people and nation, and to this end foreknew them and chose them. We believe that God justifies and sanctifies those who by grace have faith in Jesus, and that he will one day glorify them—all to the praise of his glorious grace. In love God commands and implores all people to repent and believe, having set his saving love on those he has chosen and having ordained Christ to be their Redeemer.*

Article 5 defines the particularly Calvinistic soteriology of TGC, describing the electing decree of God, as well as the international character of God’s elect people. The Statement asserts that while “all people” are commanded and implored to repent, God’s saving love is set in a salvific way only on those whom he has chosen. This article implies also that the redemptive work of Christ is particular in nature, describing Christ as the ordained Redeemer of those whom God has chosen.

### ***The Gospel***

*We believe that the gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ—God’s very wisdom. Utter folly to the world, even though it is the power of God to those who are being saved, this good news is christological, centering on the cross and resurrection: the gospel is not proclaimed if Christ is not proclaimed, and the authentic Christ has not been proclaimed if his death and resurrection are not central (the message is: “Christ died for our sins . . . [and] was raised”). This good news is biblical (his death and resurrection are according to the Scriptures), theological and salvific (Christ died for our sins, to reconcile us to God), historical (if the saving events did not happen, our faith is worthless, we are still in our sins, and we are to be pitied more than all others), apostolic (the message was entrusted to and transmitted by the apostles, who were witnesses of these saving events), and intensely personal (where it is received, believed, and held firmly, individual persons are saved).*

The gospel message itself is the focus of Article 6. This article describes the character of the message in order to clarify just where the Council believed many on the theological right had missed the point. “The gospel is not proclaimed if Christ is not proclaimed.” The precise facts of the gospel message are further delineated in the following articles.

### ***The Redemption of Christ***

*We believe that, moved by love and in obedience to his Father, the eternal Son became human: the Word became flesh, fully God and fully human being, one Person in two natures. The man Jesus, the promised Messiah of Israel, was conceived through the miraculous agency of the Holy*

*Spirit, and was born of the virgin Mary. He perfectly obeyed his heavenly Father, lived a sinless life, performed miraculous signs, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, arose bodily from the dead on the third day, and ascended into heaven. As the mediatorial King, he is seated at the right hand of God the Father, exercising in heaven and on earth all of God's sovereignty, and is our High Priest and righteous Advocate. We believe that by his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus Christ acted as our representative and substitute. He did this so that in him we might become the righteousness of God: on the cross he canceled sin, propitiated God, and, by bearing the full penalty of our sins, reconciled to God all those who believe. By his resurrection Christ Jesus was vindicated by his Father, broke the power of death and defeated Satan who once had power over it, and brought everlasting life to all his people; by his ascension he has been forever exalted as Lord and has prepared a place for us to be with him. We believe that salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved. Because God chose the lowly things of this world, the despised things, the things that are not, to nullify the things that are, no human being can ever boast before him—Christ Jesus has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption.*

Article 7 details the person and redemptive work of Jesus Christ using Nicene language. Their desire here is to be as clear as possible about the person, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

#### ***The Justification of Sinners***

*We believe that Christ, by his obedience and death, fully discharged the debt of all those who are justified. By his sacrifice, he bore in our stead the punishment due us for our sins, making a proper, real, and full satisfaction to God's justice on our behalf. By his perfect obedience he satisfied the just demands of God on our behalf, since by faith alone that perfect obedience is credited to all who trust in Christ alone for their acceptance with God. Inasmuch as Christ was given by the Father for us, and his obedience and punishment were accepted in place of our own, freely and not for anything in us, this justification is solely of free grace, in order that both the exact justice and the rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners. We believe that a zeal for personal and public obedience flows from this free justification.*

The Council here states the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement in no uncertain terms. Christ's sacrifice was one made in our place, not just an example or an evidence of his triumph (though it accomplishes those things too). This article also dispels any possibility of antinomianism by stating, "a zeal for personal and public obedience flows" out of the gospel.

#### ***The Power of the Holy Spirit***

*We believe that this salvation, attested in all Scripture and secured by Jesus Christ, is applied to his people by the Holy Spirit. Sent by the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit glorifies the Lord Jesus Christ, and, as the other Paraclete, is present with and in believers. He convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, and by his powerful and mysterious work regenerates spiritually dead sinners, awakening them to repentance and faith, and in him they are baptized into union with the Lord Jesus, such that they are justified before God by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. By the Spirit's agency, believers are renewed, sanctified, and adopted into God's family; they participate in the divine nature and receive his sovereignly*

*distributed gifts. The Holy Spirit is himself the down payment of the promised inheritance, and in this age indwells, guides, instructs, equips, revives, and empowers believers for Christ-like living and service.*

Article 9 details the work of the Holy Spirit in regenerating the hearts of God's people so they will believe the message of the gospel.

### ***The Kingdom of God***

*We believe that those who have been saved by the grace of God through union with Christ by faith and through regeneration by the Holy Spirit enter the kingdom of God and delight in the blessings of the new covenant: the forgiveness of sins, the inward transformation that awakens a desire to glorify, trust, and obey God, and the prospect of the glory yet to be revealed. Good works constitute indispensable evidence of saving grace. Living as salt in a world that is decaying and light in a world that is dark, believers should neither withdraw into seclusion from the world, nor become indistinguishable from it: rather, we are to do good to the city, for all the glory and honor of the nations is to be offered up to the living God. Recognizing whose created order this is, and because we are citizens of God's kingdom, we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, doing good to all, especially to those who belong to the household of God. The kingdom of God, already present but not fully realized, is the exercise of God's sovereignty in the world toward the eventual redemption of all creation. The kingdom of God is an invasive power that plunders Satan's dark kingdom and regenerates and renovates through repentance and faith the lives of individuals rescued from that kingdom. It therefore inevitably establishes a new community of human life together under God.*

In this article, the Statement veers away from the Fundamentalist strategy of embattled antagonism to the culture and asserts a strategy of engagement without compromise. They assert a framework of inaugurated eschatology—that the kingdom of God is “already present but not fully realized.” This framework becomes even more apparent in the next article.

### ***God's New People***

*We believe that God's new covenant people have already come to the heavenly Jerusalem; they are already seated with Christ in the heavenlies. This universal church is manifest in local churches of which Christ is the only Head; thus each “local church” is, in fact, the church, the household of God, the assembly of the living God, and the pillar and foundation of the truth. The church is the body of Christ, the apple of his eye, graven on his hands, and he has pledged himself to her forever. The church is distinguished by her gospel message, her sacred ordinances, her discipline, her great mission, and, above all, by her love for God, and by her members' love for one another and for the world. Crucially, this gospel we cherish has both personal and corporate dimensions, neither of which may properly be overlooked. Christ Jesus is our peace: he has not only brought about peace with God, but also peace between alienated peoples. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both Jew and Gentile to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. The church serves as a sign of God's future new world when its members live for the service of one another and their neighbors, rather than for self-focus. The church is the corporate dwelling place of God's Spirit, and the continuing witness to God in the world.*

Article 11 distinguishes between the universal Church and local churches, describing the former in the great theological and eschatological terms of Scripture and exhorting the latter to fulfill its calling as expressions of that greater reality.

### ***Baptism and the Lord's Supper***

*We believe that baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordained by the Lord Jesus himself. The former is connected with entrance into the new covenant community, the latter with ongoing covenant renewal. Together they are simultaneously God's pledge to us, divinely ordained means of grace, our public vows of submission to the once crucified and now resurrected Christ, and anticipations of his return and of the consummation of all things.*

The Statement says as much as it can about these two ordinances without betraying its interdenominational foundation.

### ***The Restoration of All Things***

*We believe in the personal, glorious, and bodily return of our Lord Jesus Christ with his holy angels, when he will exercise his role as final Judge, and his kingdom will be consummated. We believe in the bodily resurrection of both the just and the unjust—the unjust to judgment and eternal conscious punishment in hell, as our Lord himself taught, and the just to eternal blessedness in the presence of him who sits on the throne and of the Lamb, in the new heaven and the new earth, the home of righteousness. On that day the church will be presented faultless before God by the obedience, suffering and triumph of Christ, all sin purged and its wretched effects forever banished. God will be all in all and his people will be enthralled by the immediacy of his ineffable holiness, and everything will be to the praise of his glorious grace.*

The final article of the Statement affirms the belief in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, in agreement with all the ancient creeds and confessions. It does not take a stand on one particular interpretation of the end times, instead allowing for different understandings of this event. Article 13 prefers to focus its attention on what can be asserted without contention—that God's people will enjoy his eternal presence forever, while the unregenerate will be eternally punished. It is notable that this article also precludes the possibility of annihilationism.