

MIDWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

KNOW THE CREEDS AND COUNCILS

A BOOK REVIEW

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE COURSE
DR 37370 THE EARLY CHURCH

BY

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Introduction

In Deuteronomy 6, the passage known as the Shema may be described as a type of confession, as it “grounds the identity of God’s people in the identity of God himself in a manner that is confessional in both senses of the word: doctrinally, as a statement of truth, and liturgically, as a public declaration of faith.”¹ Though the Bible seems to provide examples of the people of God employing creedal formulas or confessionals, the church of the modern era, especially the Protestant church, demonstrates a varied commitment to employ creeds or confessions in the life of the church. Though some Baptists declare, “We have no creed but the Bible!” for others it is not a predisposition that prevents a commitment to use creeds and confessions. Rather, they exhibit ignorance of the historical development and continued value. Enter Justin S. Holcomb’s work, *Know the Creeds and Councils*.

Holcomb earned a B.A. from Southeastern University, a M.A. in Theological Studies and a M.A. in Christian Thought from Reformed Theological Seminary, and a Ph.D. from Emory University in Theological Studies. Holcomb has taught as an adjunct professor at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, is professor of Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, and has taught at The University of Virginia, Emory University, and Agnes Scott College.² Holcomb has written two books of four in the “*Know Series*” published by Zondervan. As a historian, Holcomb’s other work in the series, *Know the Heretics*, reflects a relationship to *Know the*

¹ The Value and Role of Creeds and Confessions, An Essay by Carl Trueman, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-value-and-role-of-creeds-and-confessions/>

² Justin S. Holcomb Bio, <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/faculty/adjunct/dr-justin-s-holcomb/>

Creeds and Councils by the clear focus on historical events of the early church. The other titles in the series are *Know Why You Believe* and *Know How We Got Our Bible*.

Theme and Overview

Holcomb begins this book with an immediate statement to orient the reader to the historical nature of Christianity. He intends to orient and secure his reader in their place in history while emphasizing the fact that modern believers do not exist in a vacuum, but are instead “the recipients of a long line of Christian insights” (9). He states that his goal is to “guide readers past [the] difficulty” that the work of doing church history requires and to “provide an overview of the main historical developments of Christian thought” (10).

To accomplish this purpose, the book consists of an introduction, thirteen short chapters, and a conclusion. Each chapter contains three main sections, 1) a brief explanation of the historical background, 2) an explanation of the content of the creed or confession, and 3) a section that explains the relevance of the creed or confessional for the modern church. Each chapter also includes questions for discussion and a short bibliography for further reading.

In the introduction, Holcomb’s goal is to identify the main thesis and explain “four major terms,” including the following: 1) creed, 2) confessions, 3) catechisms, and 4) councils (10). These definitions are clearly explained as Holcomb provides examples of their distinctive natures and relationships to one another, describing for each the way they are utilized in the church. Finally, though both a strength and weakness, this book is not intended to be a comprehensive guide but a catalyst to deepen the reader’s understanding of how the church has contended with important questions of her doctrine throughout the centuries.

Evaluative Summary

The arrangement of the book is based upon a chronological framework beginning with the Apostles' Creed (ca. 140). Holcomb addresses two other creeds, the Nicene Creed (325) and the Athanasian Creed (late 400-early 500). In his chapter on the Nicene Creed (NC) he includes an explanation of the Nicene Council. The other councils he addresses include the Councils of Ephesus (431, 449, 475), the Council of Chalcedon (451), The Councils of Constantinople (381, 553, 681), The Councils of Carthage and Orange (419 and 529), the Council of Trent (1545-63), and the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Holcomb then includes chapters on the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), Thirty-nine Articles of Religion (1563), the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), and one chapter that addresses the modern confessions of the Lausanne Covenant (1974) and the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978).

Holcomb shares a reason for focusing on the major creeds, councils, confessions, and catechisms included in the book. He states:

Christians of the past were no less concerned with being faithful to God than we are, and they sought to fit together all that Scripture has to say about the mysteries of Christianity—the incarnation, the Trinity, predestination, and more—with all intellectual power of their times. To ignore these insights is to attempt to reinvent the wheel, and to risk reinventing it badly. (10)

Here, he provides a clear perspective on why he focuses on these specific topics orienting and educating his readers in these brief chapters. It seems that Holcomb believes that his focus on the limited major topics will provide a broad and directed study to shape his readers in the essentials of orthodoxy. Furthermore, Holcomb admits that the book is “not an academic book,” but “is designed to be read by individuals or used in a group setting” (22). He further explains that his goal is to “complement more thorough treatments” of these topics. Therefore, the information in the book is intentionally limited in content and scope.

Creeds

Though this work is not comprehensive, Holcomb addresses the major topics that are important in and through the history of the church. His inclusion and treatment of the three predominant creeds that impact the church is valuable. In each of the chapters there is an important conclusion made about the value of the creed, not just its relevance. For instance, in the chapter on the Nicene Creed, Holcomb identifies that the main difference between it and the Apostles' Creed is the "expanded section on the relationship between Jesus and the Father" (36). Though a seemingly simple statement, it aids the reader's understanding in the progress of the creeds. In the chapter on the Athanasian Creed, he emphasizes the focus of the creed on the importance of the Trinity, describing it as "about as careful and thorough attempt as can be found in the history of the church" (68). These kinds of statements demonstrate both the development and the importance that each creed held in defining the theology of the church.

Councils

When Holcomb considers the councils, he focuses on eight councils which are covered in seven chapters of the book. His treatment of the Nicene Council is oversimplified and too brief, especially as it relates to such a vital issue as the relationship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit at this early stage of doctrinal development. In the later chapters the coverage of other councils proves to contain more thorough explanations. These chapters are successful because they include an explanation of key people and their beliefs that contributed to the issues. For example, in the chapter on the Councils of Ephesus, Holcomb, changing the basic structure of the chapter, includes sections on the "Peoples and Places," the "Nestorian Christology," and "Cyrilline Theology." Likewise, in the chapter on the Council of Carthage and Orange he

includes sections on Pelagius and Augustine to enhance the reader's understanding of why the council was required. He then adds further content in the chapter on the Council of Trent by focusing on four areas that the council addressed: 1) Institutional/Clergy Reform, 2) Scripture and Tradition, and Revelation, 3) Justification, and 4) Church and Sacraments. These kinds of amplifications aid the reader in understanding the context, both historical and theological.

The reader derives great benefits from Holcomb's address of the councils. By providing a brief and comprehensible history of each of the councils and overall covering enough key figures and topics, what may seem overwhelming and irrelevant can be understood and appreciated. Beyond appreciation, the sections on the relevance of the councils provide the modern reader insight into the controversy, the settlement, and the implications today. For instance, when addressing the Councils of Carthage and Orange, Holcomb emphasizes the importance of a person bearing "responsibility for his or her own sinfulness" (86), which was addressed in the Pelagian/Augustine conflict. Holcomb then identifies the relevance of the debate that has settled the "crucial doctrine that salvation is by grace alone" (95).

Confessions

Holcomb's treatment of confessions is somewhat limited. In the introduction he lists eleven confessions. In the book he identifies only three. The first, the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (TNAR), per Holcomb, is "hard to categorize as either creed, confession, or catechism" (123). The strength of this chapter lies in the explanation of the historical context that the Church of England faced as she was in "sort of a middle ground between the papacy of Rome and the Protestant Reformers" (123). Holcomb identifies the importance of the articles as the Anglican Church developed and expanded through Europe and later to the North American colonies.

As Holcomb explains, the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) was a reaction by the more radical Protestants, the Puritans, who had taken over Parliament and commissioned a reform of the Thirty-Nine Articles. The WCF was the result of a forged alliance with Scottish Presbyterians to develop a confession that appealed to the middle-class Puritan groups. The result was a document that left no aspect of life untouched by the importance of theology. Holcomb ties the importance of the historical developments that happened from the TNA to the WCF to later confessions that developed in the Philadelphia Association of Baptists and Book, as well as how the WCF relies upon the early creeds and their trinitarian emphasis.

Holcomb also addresses two modern confessions in one chapter, the Lausanne Covenant and the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. He attributes their importance as ecumenical movements “to show that they are attempting to reestablish the unity that has been eroded by the splintering of sectarianism of modern Christianity” (151). Holcomb succinctly explains how the Lausanne Covenant was designed to balance evangelism and social justice. He aptly describes the importance of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy as a document which would provide an anchored position on the authority, inspiration, and inerrancy of Scripture against liberalism without the statement being of a creedal nature.

Catechisms

Holcomb only expounds at length on the Heidelberg Catechism. He does mention the disagreement between the Lutheran and Zwinglian positions on the Lord’s Supper as an important part of the historical context. Holcomb also identifies the relationship that exists with Luther’s Shorter Catechism and the Shorter Westminster Catechism. However, little mention is made of the value of these catechisms or any other. Instead, he focuses on the Heidelberg Catechism for its strength in handling controversial issues, as well as in addressing the

fundamental issues of the faith. A quote from Philip Schaff about the significance the Heidelberg Catechism reads, “[It] is by far the richest and deepest in Church history . . . It is the product of the heart as well as the head, full of faith and unction from above” (120).

Final Critique

Knowing the Creeds and Councils offers the reader considerable value. For the most part, the book accomplishes the goals which Holcomb set out. This is clearly a book for the lay-person or group to initiate dialogue and a desire for further study. As a complement to other works, Holcomb wisely includes many applicable resources at the end of each chapter. Moreover, Holcomb refers to such scholars as J.N.D. Kelly, Philip Schaff, Lewis Ayres, Jaroslav Pelikan, and many more. This short list of historians he refers to is a clear indication of the scholarship he wants to complement.

Another positive acknowledgement of Holcomb’s work is the brevity with which he has accomplished his goal. This required a valiant effort on his part, requiring careful summaries of the context and content, and a keen understanding of the key circumstances and issues that drove the major events surrounding the development of the creeds and confessions. Furthermore, considering the audience, much of the terminology requires careful explanation. Holcomb provides the correct balance of terms and clarity to prevent his readers from being inundated or feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of the doctrine.

The questions at the end of each chapter provide a final positive aspect to the book. Oftentimes, in books like this, editors fail to rightly connect the questions for discussion to the material in the chapter or the questions seem to merely focus on repetition of the material. For each of the chapters in *Knowing the Creeds and Confessions*, the questions rightly engage the reader or discussion group. They are required to think through and interact with the material

based on the knowledge they have acquired. The questions will require and will lead to practical application for the reader. For example, a question on the Nicene Council and Creed reads, “What images or metaphors do you use to understand the Trinity? Can you see their shortcomings?” (39). This two-part question requires the reader to think through illustrations they have heard and used while engaging with the doctrine of the Trinity that was debated in the Council. The question then requires critical thinking to determine the shortcomings. Another example is found in the chapter on the Council of Chalcedon. The question asks, “What are some examples of how Christians today use language that does not fully follow the Definition of Chalcedon? Does this language lean toward Nestorainism or Eutychianism?” (61).

Though there are a number of positive qualities contained in *Know the Creeds and Councils*, this reviewer finds some areas lacking. First, Holcomb identifies the Nicene Creed as the “most influential creed” (33), while this chapter is the least developed in terms of historical context and content. Though the issues surrounding the Nicene Creed can be complicated, Holcomb proves elsewhere that he possesses the ability to provide more careful development on this topic. Unfortunately, the coverage is so brief that the chapter oversimplifies the matter for the reader.

Had Holcomb included more information on key figures in the debates surrounding the creeds and councils, the book’s value would increase. Seldom did he mention more than one or two figures that were instrumental in the debates and decisions, which limits those readers who are not familiar with this era from researching further on the individuals themselves and reading primary sources. This could have been addressed in the section “Further Reading,” but only two chapters contained references to primary sources.

Lastly, when contemplating the various confessions and catechisms available today, Holcomb misses the opportunity to refer to many of those while directing his reader in further study. For instance, in the introduction he lists eleven confessions in chronological order. However, his list falls short of including the *French Confession of Faith* (1559), the *Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles* (1609), the *Orthodox Creed* (1679), the *Second London Baptist Confession* (1689), and the *Philadelphia Confession of Faith* (1742), to list only a few. Holcomb does not mention other catechisms that were often employed in church history. He fails to point to the catechism many pastors developed around specific doctrinal distinctives (especially around soteriology, baptism, and the Lord's Supper). It seems as if Holcomb's background in Reformed theology and Episcopal ecclesiology shapes his emphases in certain areas of the book. This reviewer's opinion is that Holcomb fails to connect the relevance of several matters to his modern reader in poignant ways. For instance, this work, published in 2014, should have mentioned the *New City Catechism*, published in 2012 as a relevant resource for a modern reader looking for greater relevance in the use of catechisms.³

Conclusion

Know The Creeds and Councils is a valuable resource specifically designed for laypeople who want an introduction to doctrine of the early church and its relevance throughout the centuries. Though brief and lacking in a few areas, the creeds, councils, confessions, and catechism the book covers provide a balanced and central line of orthodoxy that relates both Protestant and Catholic thought cordially. If the goal is to be catalyst for group discussion, this

³ Introducing New City Catechism, Staff Writer, October 14, 2012. The Gospel Coalition Website. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/introducing-new-city-catechism/>.

would be an excellent resource. This book would be an impetus for further discussions or studies on key theological issues and historical developments. Holcomb demonstrates the ability to diffuse the typical negative or cautious perspectives of history and theology and at the same time he raises the value of those topics for most laypeople. Finally, Holcomb is correct in his declaration that this book is to supplement other academic effort. There is great value in *Know The Creeds and Councils*. It is an introductory work intended to direct readers to other works where the depths of study might be plumbed.

For Discussion:

How did reading this book help you in your own understanding of the creeds and councils?

Did you notice the leaning of Holcomb towards his own tradition?

Do you think that you could use this book in a small group setting effectively? What would that look like?