

Creeds and Standards Their Significance and Functions

This article appears as Chapter VIII in *The Reformed Principle of Authority*, by Gerrit Hendrik Hospers and published by "The Reformed Press", Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1924.

[Gerrit Hendrik Hospers](#)

A Creed is a formal summary of fundamental points of religious belief, setting forth in an authoritative way on the part of a Church its views of faith and practice. Summaries of this kind are also called 'Standards'. The definition of this word contributes towards the understanding of its nature, functions and values. The Standard Dictionary thus defines the word: "A standard is a flag, ensign, or banner, considered as a distinctive emblem of a government, body of men, or special cause or movement. Hence, any type, model, example, or authority with which comparison may be made; any fact, thing, or circumstance forming the basis for adjustment and regulation; a criterion of excellence; test." This word 'standard' therefore as applied to the formulary of a Church has this function, that, having been established on behalf of and with the consent of the membership, it conveys a concise construction of the Christian faith. As such it is an official document with which comparison may be made in order the more readily to determine the correctness of what is to be held in such a Church as their view of the general and fundamental content of Scripture. Agreement with such a standard determines the right of any one being a proper adherent of such a communion.

Along with Dogmatic Theology few good words are spoken these days in favor of Creeds and Standards. In a rather supercilious way they are sometimes represented as being "mummies", mere formalities which are being "mouthed". They have been called "canned goods". It has been affirmed that our "thinking youth" admit an inability of "getting behind the words of the Creeds"; and this inability may also be applied to a large number of older folks.

We want to ask, How is it possible that it should be such an objectionable matter to have Creeds and Standards? Do not all schools of thought and various associations of men have to some degree these more or less definite formularies which serve to inform those who belong to them, and others, as to their exact character? A political party has its platform; a school of medicine has certain ideas in regard to disease and its cure; whatever systems of philosophy there have ever been, set forth their own distinctive principles.

What necessity has led to the formulation of Creeds? Simply this: the exceeding riches, the wide compass, and the depth of significance of the wisdom of God with which the

finite mind of man has ever struggled to comprehend and assimilate it. The brightest minds and the choicest spirits have found their most exalted occupations in seeking to fathom the profound ways and thoughts of God. They have not fully agreed. Different types of belief have arisen; as, Greek and Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, Lutheran and Reformed Protestantism and their numerous subsidiary forms characterizing the Baptist, the Methodist, the Unitarian, the Adventist, etc. All these are so specific in their general type of thought and practise that they must live in separate organization in order harmoniously to carry out their views. And these beliefs and practices are known by their Creeds—the definite setting forth of their particular beliefs.

Can this Creed formation be dispensed with in our present state of existence? Is it superfluous? Must the Church be a heterogeneous jumble of all kinds of individual beliefs getting along with each other as best they can? In other spheres of thought it is a mark of quality to have definition and precision: must this be an exception in religion? How extremely particular our lawmakers are in the phraseology of their statutes. What scrupulous care the legal profession exercises in the delivery of opinions. How marvelously exact the language of the decisions of the Supreme Court! Why should expression be denied to the great basic principles on which an entire structure of doctrine rests, the things pertaining to the revelation of the All-wise God and for the tremendous eternal concerns of man?

The idea that in dispensing with Creeds churches are after all better off, is a delusion and a snare. Thinking people have certain general, well-defined ideas in regard to what they view as constituting the teaching of the Bible, and these can most harmoniously be practiced in separate households of faith. Even the Baptist in his determination to do without a Creed has at least the unwritten belief in adult baptism, immersion as the only correct mode, and other matters. They even have their individual churches which more or less definitely range themselves on orthodox or modernistic lines. They stand upon some basis which though not authoritatively promulgated, is practically a standing upon a creed. More than people are aware of or want to own, they have their private range of beliefs, couched in a more or less logical system which they have gained from their previous education. To all intents and purposes these are their standards by which they measure the quality and correctness of the beliefs of others, even though they are unwritten.

However, these considerations do not fully account for the general aversion to Creeds. There is something more vital at the bottom of it.

First of all, we shall refer to ignorance of Scripture and indolence in acquiring its facts and contents as playing a great role. When it is affirmed that our young people are not interested and that they cannot get behind the expressions of the Creeds, it is largely an indication of ignorance which is aided by the natural bent of the sinful heart to entertain an aversion to the things of the Spirit of God. No one needs to say that the language and the ideas of the Creed are so incomprehensible to the alert youth of our land, least of all to those who in our schools grapple with the problems of mathematics and the abstruse ideas of philosophy. Intelligent study of the Scriptures cannot avoid the

necessity of coming to some comprehensive construction of the material. A question like that pertaining to the Deity of Christ must be faced, *nolens volens*, and in connection with it his nature and origin. And even the ministry is much to blame in living too much on the superficial plane of practical affairs, at home in the realm of shallow thought, interested in sports and the like more than in the mysteries of the Kingdom of God to which their high calling claims the highest if not the chief attention. But even then all ages and conditions of men *will* get their religious ideas. In some unsought way religious problems will force themselves on one's attention. Errorists have a way of charming with specious reasoning and appealing to some hidden natural prejudice and make ardent disciples for their particular cause. Systematic and well advised training has been neglected so long that the balance-wheel of the mind has gone wild, and an arbitrary subjectivism, a disposition to obey every whim of the fancy, has full sway in our times. Thus superficial ideas, whose content and bearing have not been seen, preëempt the mind against better things.

A second reason to account for the aversion to Creeds is hostility against the doctrines which are therein set forth. The regular Creeds have been carefully constructed and have brought out the deep things of God in such a pointed manner as to challenge the submission of a self-sufficient reason. The hurry of the times which does not take leisure to stop for quiet consideration has brought a mass of impressions which are immature, distorted, mistaken, and wild of control: they who hold them chafe at the restraints of a well-ordered arrangement. The average thinker of this day is individualistic; he knows it all; he is a law unto himself; even though he professes reverence for the Bible and the Savior. Their objection that the Creeds create formalists is a confusion of reference. Of course we all disapprove of formalism. But the objection in question really has in mind quite a different thing: it is opposed to certain doctrines which these Creeds set before them and which they resent.

Then there is the objection that religion is not merely a system of doctrine but a life, a "spirit, a radiating, saturating influence". This divorces feeling from fact, and makes existence an abstraction. On this principle the emotional pantheist, the contemplative Buddhist meet all the requirements of religion, and the "only Name given under heaven among men whereby we must be saved", is a case of extravagant demand. However, religion is a definite relation to the Living God, one who has revealed Himself definitely in regard to the way in which He demands service. We are to know His character and must worship and serve Him in the way which accords with these requirements. To be safe, we are to proceed on the premises laid down by God Himself. We have the concrete instances of God's working, as it shows forth His grace on the background of history which is thus related to us creatures of time and connected with forms. Even if it should be no more than equivocation, it is damaging to the Christian faith for Canon Simpson to say: "There is no sufficient gospel in the Apostles' Creed to save the proverbial church-mouse. Men and women are never saved by formulae. They are never redeemed by possessing information about God. I have yet to learn that it is the function of a Creed to save souls We can only believe in persons. We cannot believe in the Bible. We can only believe in God." Such a violent severance of fact and form can only do harm. The Apostles' Creed furnishes us the great facts of the Christian

religion, which facts are inextricably connected with the operation of the Holy Spirit for the apprehension of the truth and as He applies the redemption in Christ. The fact of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, e.g., belongs to the indispensable conditions of salvation; to know them and to refer them to the quality of the person and the purpose of their occurrence, — all this and more lies in the way of salvation. We believe in the Bible as we would believe in the voice of God could it be heard addressing us from the sky. Believing the Bible, we believe the words, and we believe the person who is inextricably woven up with His own Word in whatever form it comes to us. According to the Reformed principle of authority the identification of Scripture with the will of God is so complete that we call Scripture the principle of authority. Hence it is that the Creed as based upon Scripture is not merely a form, but becomes to the believing heart the very reality. In matters of locomotion the engineer of course may speak of the steam as the power needed, and they may, so to speak, be called the vital element, the parts of the engine being so much metal, still, as the latter holds the steam and directs its power, the entire engine is thought of as a unit, and as such is effective.

As a further example of frightful thoughtlessness and conceit, you can read this in a prominent religious journal which prides itself on its high degree of intelligence and common sense: "Our young people feel competent to make their own statements of faith." Here is a combination of ignorance and temerity which challenges its equal. How unworthy of intellectual men to make such sweeping off-hand statements. As if the Word of God is such a simple thing and to be mastered on a casual perusal! As to the facility with which a Creed can be constructed the wise and sober words of Prof. D. P. D. Fabius, of the Free University of Amsterdam, are to the point:

The Confession of the Church is a labor of the ages. In the consecutive periods of history all its doctrines have been arrived at as the result of comprehensive, thorough investigation. Indeed, the Church has been obliged to follow up to the very roots all different views. Whence the statement of a doctrine must be the conclusion of a laborious process, even though in a certain sense it may have something tentative about it, for the possibility of revision is never excluded. Vain conceit, o man, that you in your short life and with your weak powers should have to perform all these labors anew with as much success! And the Confession is more than an indispensable regulative bond. As the work of centuries it has authority even though not unconditional.

However great the value of a Confession is, it must also be noted that no one pretends that it stands above the Bible or takes the place thereof. It always professes to stand squarely and unreservedly *upon* it. And where doubt in regard to a doctrine obtains, the appeal is directly to Scripture as the final authority. The Confession of Faith published at Basel in 1534 says: "All these articles of faith remain subject to the judgment of the Holy Scriptures to whom we owe obedience." And so say all the Confessions. A Creed is simply a digest, an epitome of the doctrinal contents of the Bible. It aims to give this content in an orderly, comprehensive and carefully articulated form. It aims to do this with such scientific precision as the nature of the material will admit of. Hence, with a correct Creed we possess the Bible in fuller measure, just as a map will better give to the mind the total impression of a landscape than an attempt to visualize every square

foot of the ground. Now the Bible is such a rich store-house of material, such a wonderful intertwining of history, poetry, prophecy, etc., that the most painstaking effort is necessary to present it in bird's-eye view to the understanding. The wealth of Divine thought and teaching is not laid down in a ready-to-hand, pre-digested form, lying in easy reach of everybody; but it is given in such a form as needs to be analyzed, assimilated and reconstructed in the consciousness of the examiner who represents the spirit of the time he lives in. As God's work in nature has a fineness of texture which the most powerful microscope discloses (and have the limits been reached?), as each advance of science opens up new wonders and glories of the universe hitherto unsuspected, so the more marvelous organism of the Mind of the Holy Spirit, the Supreme Designer and Architect of all things, who "brooded" over the waters, by Whom all life is given, the Spirit of the Sevenfold Wisdom of God, has "moved" upon holy men of God to write The Book which even in its lowliness shows forth Divinity, and we may thence expect that it shall tax all the ingenuity of man to explore its depths, lengths, breadths and heights.

When a society of believers organize themselves with certain beliefs and practices which find their expression in Creed and Confession, they must not be accused of "monopolizing religion". This is a current misapprehension. They are simply aiming to be true to the teaching of Scriptures as they see it, and which they must protect in their own jurisdiction. By so doing they do not question the reality of saving faith in others who disagree with them on divers doctrinal points and practices. Indeed, they will invite brethren of other households of faith to come with them to the Lord's table and invite their ministers occasionally to preach the Word to them. In the latter case one will expect that courtesy will prevent any such one from trespassing upon the good nature of the audience from preaching what would be contrary to their religious convictions.

The demand for acquiescence in the beliefs of a particular denomination, whichever one it is, is a *matter of good order* and *not* one involving the determination of a state of grace. It is such a mistaken thing to represent the issues today as raising the latter point. And then the orthodox are singled out as so very intolerant. It is strange that the orthodox in particular must always get the stigma of intolerance! It looks very much as if this is of a piece of the view of the law-breaker who constitutionally hates the policeman, because he is always after *him*. Why should not good order have its intolerance as well as light has its intolerance of darkness? Any host will show intolerance to his guest if the latter persists to carry out ideas of his own in the former's own establishment. It is passing strange that the ecclesiastical *intruder* must be granted loving tolerance whilst the servant in the house gets obloquy for his *faithfulness*. Broadness is good, but you may not make it toleration of error and treachery against your particular trust. There is sovereignty in every particular sphere of thought and life. Nothing would seem to be more self-evident than the right of any school or party to determine its own identity, indicate its marks and expect all who wish to be reckoned as adhering to such a view to be faithful to it, and when this can no more be done, then peacefully to withdraw where a better accord can be found.

This brings up the question of heresy. Standard Dictionary thus defines the word: "Heresy is an opinion or doctrine, entertained by a professed adherent of a church, by a former member of it, or by one whose allegiance it claims, that is contrary to the fundamental or distinguishing tenets of that church." Now, while science and law pride themselves on clear-cut distinctions, the great mass of men would not have it so in the church: there it becomes intolerance not to allow everything the right of domicile. The term heretic is hated by them. Self-contradiction must be allowed in the church under the plea of broadmindedness and love. Modernism in particular boasts of its better insight of the spirit of the Master and its practice of his virtues, but it frowns upon the obscurantism and backwardness of those who would remain true to their vows and to the well-considered truths of the saints of the ages. What scrambled ethics! The Modernist insists in the name of love that the intruder have at least equal rights with the owner. Dr. E. H. Kistler correctly characterized the situation when he said: "For a man to preach a different attitude than the accepted one of his pulpit denomination is spiritual piracy." Certainly! For divers passengers to mutiny against captain and crew and steer the ship in a wrong course and live under different regulations is mutiny. But what would you think of the ethics of the matter if these same mutineers should say, in trying to dissuade the captain and the crew from attempting to regain their lawful rule: "Be nice; don't be so rude as to use force; allow us also full liberty of action even if it is different from your ways; pray, fulfil the law of love and of Christ by showing this kindness and consideration!" The Auburn Seminary "Chapel Bell" comments on this statement of Dr. Kistler's: "We submit that such a statement as that savors of intellectual slavery and sectarian autocracy. If a man believes that his denominational standards are not infallible it is his privilege and duty to stay in the denomination and correct them. Dr. Kistler's doctrine is the essence of Roman Catholicism applied to Protestantism. It is of a piece with the whole wretched mess of heresy trials, denominational shibboleths and medieval cocksureness." This is outspoken. However, is it "intellectual slavery" to be loyal to vows once taken? Is that "sectarian autocracy" when a minister does not need to stay where he is, not being subject to a Protestant Inquisition? That mutinous crew could talk after the same fashion. And should they be called to stand trial for their opposition to the established authority, they might possibly call the trial a "wretched mess". When we do happen to have authority and when its sphere of operation is definitely circumscribed and vows are taken to maintain them, what system of ethics does that Auburn Modernist have as his standard of ethical excellence? Furthermore, if a minister disagrees with these Standards of his Church the way is open to make an attempt at correction. If the membership cannot so see it and decide to retain the age-old interpretation of the truths of Scripture the presumption is on their side, and surely the primary rights in the case, and the dissenter is honorable only then when he withdraws and seeks the place where he can exercise his new views. There is opportunity enough for this purpose. The orthodox may be thought medieval, but in medieval times we can probably also find some sort of a rationalist. The orthodox is "cocksure"; so was Paul when he said: "I believe: therefore have I spoken." And the Apostle John, he the one that always spoke of love, was very cocksure. And we think the Modernist in particular is cocksure. But let him act honestly with it and go where he belongs, instead of intruding upon grounds which he has come to subvert.

If a minister persists in holding doctrines in conflict with the Standards of his Church, it is incumbent upon such a Church to take action. *The Christian Century* is to be commended for its honesty in saying on the matter: "If a church forms a creed—we disapprove of creeds for ecclesiastical purposes as our readers very well know— but if a religious body does assume the responsibility of framing a creed, it cannot escape the consequent and correlative responsibility of determining how seriously that creed is to be taken and how strictly it is to be regarded as a standard of doctrine." And *The Wall Street Journal* said: "Ministers who do not believe what they professed to believe when they were ordained would resign their jobs if they had the self-respect of the businessmen they are only too ready to lecture. Our modern preachers ready to start new philosophies, while clinging to old stipends, might show a more exact knowledge of the theology they discard." And many more instances are on record of the secular press condemning the dishonesty of heretic ministers refusing to leave the Church whose tenets they promised to defend.

"We believe that men should be as free to teach as the winds are to blow. But we also believe that the Presbyterian Church is a church whose creed in the most explicit and unmistakable language commits its ministers to certain definite views of Christ and the Scriptures. No men should be ordained to the ministry in the Presbyterian Church who cannot cheerfully accept the doctrinal teachings; and to countenance in Presbyterian pulpits a teaching which violates the creed of the church is as contrary to right as it is contrary to common sense (*The Nation*).

There would be nothing strange in any other walk of life to enforce fundamental rights. But what an outcry arises when such enforcement is attempted within a church! The hue is raised: "Heresy-hunting!" "Heresy trial!" All are familiar with the cheap device by means of which even a good man or cause can acquire a mark of dishonor which can not easily be removed. It consists in assiduously cultivating a slanderous report and spreading it all around. If it succeeds in attaching a label made fast in the prejudices of the public it will require great courage to meet it. But must a man, must a church of sterling character fear? In times of widespread rebellion in a civil state it requires extraordinary courage to defend almost single-handed the honor of the flag. Traitors will seek to overcome such loyalty with cries of "disciplinarian", "martinet", "reactionary", etc. But no man of sterling rectitude should be so swerved from his convictions. No one should be afraid of calling a man a heretic or joining others in a careful determination thereof. These things must not be lightly done, neither must controversy be sought for its own sake. "Ecclesiastical controversy is unavoidable when a principle has found entrance into the church which is foreign to her and threatens her identity, and when at the same time a powerful operation of her own life-principle obtains" (Prof. Rutgers). And is the situation as serious as this? Listen once more to the radical, but honest *The Christian Century*:

How deep-going is the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy? Or are the fundamentalists right in claiming that the issue is a grave one, going to the root of religious conviction and involving the basic purposes and almost the genius of Christianity itself? A candid reply to such inquiries must be one of agreement with the

fundamentalist claim. The differences are not mere surface differences, but they are foundation differences, amounting in their radical dissimilarity almost to the differences between two distinct religions. Two world-views, two moral ideas, two sets of personal attitudes have clashed Christianity according to fundamentalism is one religion. Christianity according to Modernism is another religion Two worlds have crashed, the world of tradition and the world of modernism. One is scholastic, static, authoritarian, individualistic; the other is vital, dynamic, free, social (Jan. 3, 1924).

This outspoken Modernist view agrees with as outspoken an opinion of the orthodox champion, Dr. Machen: "The plain fact is, disguised though it be by the use of traditional language, that two mutually exclusive religions are contending for the control of the Presbyterian Church. One is the great redemptive religion known as Christianity; the other is the naturalistic or agnostic Modernism, essentially the same, I suppose, as the religion of the Positivists, or of Prof. Elwood, which is opposed, not at one point, but at every point, to the Christian faith."

Such a situation justifies any attempt to ward off the impending dangers, to cut out the cancer. We cannot afford to deceive ourselves at the cost of life and must grapple with the horrid monster of heresy. Says Kuyper:

To deny the idea of heresy is in its last analysis a denial of the Scriptures as a special revelation of God. No heresy, but then also no church of Christ with a spirit of its own. No heresy, but then also we shall have to return to the lament of Pilate and say: "What is truth?" Or else we shall have to gird ourselves for the task of a Sisyphus of ever *searching* for the truth. It is therefore altogether correct that the Modernist will not hear of heresy, but for us to confess Christ according to the Scriptures and at the same time to ignore the right of existence of the idea of heresy, is inconsistent and a lack of insight.

To ignore the idea of heresy is disloyalty and lawlessness. An Elder in *The Presbyterian* rather sharply but truly writes:

Now, is the minister who breaks the laws of his denomination less culpable than the bootlegger who breaks the law of his country? Do not both give practically the same reason for so doing; the bootlegger, because it curbs his personal liberty, and the minister because it restrains his freedom of speech. But is not the real reason the same too? The bootlegger makes money out of his defiance of the law, and the minister draws a good salary while he preaches contrary to the teaching of his denomination. Of course, one would not expect such an unprincipled man as a bootlegger to give up his unlawful business because of conscientious scruples; but should not a minister, who does not hold to the teachings of his denomination take the high moral grounds that he is taking money under false pretense, and quit his pulpit? There is no such thing as absolute freedom either of action or of speech, without infringing civil or ecclesiastical law. So why tolerate either lawbreaker? Are not both boot-leggers, in the sense that they are lawbreakers and peddlers of poison? (Jan. 17, 1924).

How differently have they acted who stood for the right and were hindered in so doing. We will only remind the reader of the heroism of the four hundred ministers in the great Scottish Disruption who left their churches, manses and salaries for conscience sake.

But to be fair, we must listen to what is said in justification of the course of the Modernists in remaining where they are. By what method of reasoning do Modernists justify themselves in remaining in their church affiliations though opposed to the Standards? *The Christian Century* of April 12, 1923, quotes Prof. C. P. Fagnani, of Union Theological Seminary, as follows: "A little reflection ought to show that an honorable man, a loyal man, one who really cares for the Church, instead of resigning and withdrawing and shirking responsibility, is conscientiously bound to remain in it and bring as many of his brethren as possible around to his way of thinking. Yes, it is his bounden duty to stand his ground and proclaim the truth as he sees it. He must staunchly refuse to withdraw of his own accord no matter how much averse he may personally feel to mere notoriety, strife and contention."

The important element Prof. Fagnani overlooks is that such a minister has *subscribed to adhere* to the Standards of the Church and so *promised to defend* them; his bounden duty is to be true to his word or to readjust himself. One may stand for his beliefs and bring as many people around to them as possible, but he may not honorably do so inside the denomination whose doctrine he has definitely accepted: this is mutiny and treason. But to stand outside and fight thence, is in accord with every notion of legitimate warfare. Responsibilities will not be shirked by fighting from the outside, and bounden duty can much better be performed from that direction. Double-dealing, even in a good cause, must be condemned by every honest man.

In our remarks we may have given offense to moderate liberals who do not wish to be classed with rationalists, possibly not even with Modernists, but who insist that they are true Presbyterians. But how can the "innocent bystander" escape being hit by stray bullets when he is dangerously near the crowd of mutineers? An outspoken, unequivocal stand, either on one side or on the other is the way of truth and safety today.

It is the opinion of many (Unitarians included) that the 150 Presbyterians who signed the "Affirmation" occupy a disingenuous position. They indeed profess adherence to the Standards, and they fortify themselves with a special confession of their faith which, as far as it goes, looks good. But they are careful to add that the Confession does not commit them to certain theories of certain doctrines. *But this is the very point at issue. In the light of recent history their profession does not square with fact.* Why is it necessary to make such a strenuous effort to set themselves right before the Standards? Why all this ado to justify the Presbytery of New York? Why must this Presbytery be upheld when it licences men who refuse to declare full belief in the Standards? Why must preaching which is decidedly off-color be defended? The key to the whole situation is that these brethren do not stand four-square to the Standards of the Church, when they allow of interpretations which compromise the clear wording of the Standards. Such

actions are not, as they want it to appear, broadminded; on the contrary, they are disloyal and untrue. They invade the Scripture principle of the Reformation.

Liberals who have subscribed to a Creed hold that a wide latitude of interpretation of such a Creed should be allowed. But it must be clear that such an idea of a Creed is inconsistent with its very nature—its express purpose; which is, definitely to state the particular beliefs of a Church. In their Pastoral Letter of 1923 the American Episcopal bishops said: "To deny, or to treat as immaterial, belief in the creeds in which at every regular service of the Church both minister and congregation profess to believe is to trifle with words and cannot but expose us to the suspicion of dishonesty and unreality." Similarly *The Christian Century* said:

If the church means by its creed to define precisely the theology of all its ministers—and that seems to be the implication—then the church should act upon that theory and protect itself from variant forms of teaching. But meanwhile there come clear indications that this great denomination [the Anglican and American Episcopal Churches] does not really hold to that theory And the Archbishop of Canterbury says: 'The study of theology imperatively demands freedom for its conditions. To tell a man to study, and yet bid him, under heavy penalties, to come to the same conclusions as those who have not studied, is to mock him'. So the Archbishop of Canterbury supports, as it seems, the general sentiment of the English Church, that, whatever the creed does mean in the life of the Church, it does not mean that freedom of thought and speech is to be limited by its formulations. Some of us think that the creeds have become excess baggage, that the churches would be all better off without them. But as long as they remain, no church is entitled to avoid the embarrassments which they entail by requiring the alleged heretic to be his own judge, jury and executioner (Apr. 13, 1923).

To be sure, these things were the very reasons for which the Creeds were formulated, and subscription denoted acquiescence with them, honest and straightforward. But no one is bound to remain identified with its plain teachings. There fore if anyone feels a so-called "gravamen", the constitutions of the churches indicate a way in which it may be considered: there is, in greater or lesser degree, a possibility of revision, to meet the altered views which may have arisen. But if this revision cannot be procured, that is, if the church after due investigation still holds fast to its creed, there is no way out for an honest dissentient than to resign his connection with a church with whose creedal requirement he cannot agree. He must respect the church in its beliefs and a church will not take such a resignation ill. No one is compelled to belong to a church, but if he so elects, he does so voluntarily because he accords with its doctrinal and practical requirements.

Closely related to this is the feeling that subscription to a Creed after all fetters free thought and binds the conscience. To repeat once more the words of the Archbishop of Canterbury: "The study of theology imperatively demands freedom for its condition. To tell a man to study, and yet to bind him, under heavy penalties, to come to the same conclusions as those who have not studied, is to mock him." But this is well answered by the Episcopal bishops of America in their Pastoral Letter of 1923: "So far from

imposing fetters on our thought, the creeds, with their simple statements of great truths and facts without elaborate philosophical disquisition, give us a point of departure for free thought and speculation on the meaning and consequences of the facts revealed by God. The truth is never a barrier to thought. In belief, as in life, it is the truth that makes us free."

Absolute freedom is license, and near of kin to anarchy. Civil liberty is perfectly served in these United States of America by strict subjection to our national constitution. When we rejoice in the freedom wherewith Christ has made us free, we do not object that his requirements of service are definite and inexorable: these do not limit our freedom. Similarly, if one claims to belong to the Reformed household, he is enjoying certain blessings in the light of the Reformation; if he truly understands them, he will not feel any irksomeness or violence of his convictions, but a most cordial approval and wholesouled concurrence: he will not know how it could be otherwise. He cannot help himself from "coming to the same conclusions of thought" as others did. The very fact of perfect agreement is in his case as inescapable as the constancy with which the tables of multiplication always come true. Still we do not complain of the iron certainty of arriving at determinate results in our mathematical operations: we call it freedom. If then anyone in the household of Reformed faith feels uncomfortable therein, he is an alien; he is not of the same spirit; he builds on other generic foundations; he is a heretic; he belongs elsewhere and should go there. A Reformed theologian proceeds from such principles as *must* issue in a uniformity of general results.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [Reformed Perspectives Magazine Forum](#).

Subscribe to Reformed Perspectives Magazine

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [Reformed Perspectives Magazine](#), please select this [link](#).