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CREEDAL CONFUSION

A CRITIQUE OF *THE CREEDAL IMPERATIVE* BY CARL TRUUMAN

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“Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.” (Jude 3)

“But you, beloved, ought to remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ,” (Jude 17)

The development of errant church movements like Emergent, grounded in philosophies such as romanticism and idealism, has rightly led Christian writers to push back against changes to the authoritative doctrines of the Christian church. I am such a writer. I believe that Scripture alone gives us the authority and power to “refute those who contradict.” We can deal with contemporary arguments on their own terms and show their various fallacies. But in the end the Christian faith is grounded in the truth that God has spoken “once for all.”

Others who say they believe this think that binding and authoritative creeds in church history are the best way to fight error and the trends of culture. Carl Trueman is a theologian who defends creedalism as necessary for orthodoxy in the church and for defense against damaging, cultural trends.¹ Trueman does not merely claim that creeds produced by the church after the death of the apostles are useful, but claims that they are imperative and binding. In the process Trueman slides between what is “imperative” and what “seems” to him to be necessary. I will show that his categories are fuzzy at best and incoherent at worst. The categorical difference between the imperative and the subjunctive moods is such that serious confusion ensues when one tries to blend the two. Stated more succinctly, we must determine what is binding on the church and what is a matter of

Christian liberty.

THE IMPERATIVE THAT ISN'T

To his credit, Trueman has a high view of Scripture and affirms “Scripture alone.” He cites Paul’s admonitions to Timothy to ground his claim of a creedal imperative. For example: “*Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*” (2 Timothy 1:13 ESV cited by Trueman: 74). Stating that that these “sound words” are “suggestive of creedal formulation,” Trueman claims that the form of such words imply a future special vocabulary that would be developed later in the church which would become “normative” (Trueman: 74, 75).

Before we say more about Trueman’s application of this passage, we should examine what Paul said. The imperative in the verse is “follow” (Greek echo_ in the imperative mood, which means “hold” in this passage). What must be retained, followed, held (as variously translated) is “the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me.” The source of this “form or pattern” of words which must be held was Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ who spoke for God. The truths given by Paul to Timothy were binding because of Paul’s apostolic status to write Holy Spirit-inspired Scripture. Some future church leader could create a pattern of words and say that it is binding, but not

being a true apostle, that person’s words are not binding unless they are valid implications and applications of Scripture. Whether or not these implications are valid must be judged by members of the church (1 Corinthians 14:29). There is a categorical and qualitative difference between Holy Spirit-inspired authors of scripture and teachers from later in church history.

Trueman’s interpretation of 2 Timothy 1:13 involves immediately going from the “form” of words to the concept of “special vocabulary” that would be developed: “The church has developed over time a tried-and-trusted vocabulary to express the concerns she wishes to articulate” (Trueman: 74, 75). This statement takes us from the imperative of the passage to Trueman’s indicative. I agree that such vocabulary has developed and agree that it is valid to use theological shorthand to describe complex theological ideas such as the trinity and many others. Saying this, the Christian teacher should have the competence and means to defend the ideas behind such theological terminology directly from scripture when there is a challenge to the truths thus expressed. But the process of going from the imperative to the indicative soon leads to the subjunctive for Trueman.² For example:

An established, conventional vocabulary for orthodox teaching is thus of great help to the church in her task of educating her members and of establishing helpful and normative signposts of what is and is not orthodox (Trueman: 75).

He has gone from the imperative to what is helpful. But when he uses “normative,” I see confusion of categories. “Normative” would be the “standard of sound words” while “helpful” would be nicely useful in ways that other approaches might work as well. This is what I mean by calling his approach

“creedal confusion.” This sort of category shifting is typical in Trueman’s book. On the next page he goes from “helpful” to “seems”: “the Bible itself seems to demand that we have forms of sound words, and that this is what creeds are” (Trueman 76). No, the Bible commands that we hold to the pattern of sound words that came from Paul (and other Holy Spirit-inspired authors of Scripture); it doesn’t merely “seem” to do so. But he shifts to “seems” because he brings in the “creeds” which did not come directly from the apostles. He continues later on the same page: “This is not the only instance in the New Testament of statements that seem to have creedal sensibility” (Trueman: 76). Thus he leaves behind the “imperative” in the title of his book and shifts to a much weaker claim.

In his conclusion, Trueman reveals the same weakness. The book uses an unnamed foe who makes the claim “no creed but the Bible” his standard. I do not endorse creedalism and strongly affirm the need to judge all claims that purport to be grounded in the Bible; but I have never adopted “no creed but the Bible” as a slogan. Someone has and thus has provoked Trueman’s scorn. In refuting that slogan, Trueman writes:

The Bible itself seems to demand the production of something like a creed or confession. The Pauline imperatives of holding fast to a form of sound words and of guarding the apostolic teaching both push the church toward creedal or confessional formulations and documents. (Trueman: 187).

Here again “seems to” is mixed up with “imperatives” to imply that Paul commanded people in the future to write creeds and demand that people take oaths to uphold them. Trueman’s fuzzy categories do not provide an adequate basis for performing binding and loosing (we will cover that in the next section).

The reason for the fuzzy categories soon appears as Trueman asserts that Paul knew that the church would need traditions that would be passed down through generations. Trueman’s book defends creedalism as the necessary

means for this. This is accomplished by equivocating on the term “tradition.” He cites this passage: “*So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter*” (2 **Thessalonians 2:15 ESV**). He rightly affirms that this “tradition” came from Paul and other apostles, and that its content as spoken or written, is normative and is centered on the gospel (Trueman: 77). This is good. I fully agree that the gospel has stable content, is validly communicated using words and that it is for all people in all future generations. But Trueman uses the statement, “passed down from generation to generation” to set up his “creedal imperative.” I would say, “true and binding on all people in any generation.” We do have direct access to the Scriptures.

But that does not give us the creedalism of the type promoted by Carl Trueman. He states:

This tradition is to be regulated by Scripture as the sole authoritative source of knowledge of God’s actions; but is not formally identical with Scripture. It uses forms of sound words, sermons, hymns, and prayers, among other things, in order to pass the message from one generation to another. (Trueman: 78)

This is a huge leap away from what the passages about traditions and patterns of words claimed. Now Paul’s imperatives (such as “stand firm” and “hold”) that applied to Scripture given by Holy Spirit-inspired authors are applied to “prayers and sermons.” The “tradition” he was referring to was directly from Scripture; but now Trueman equivocates on the term and makes it material from church history that did not come directly from apostles. Yes, Trueman said that it is to be “regulated by Scripture.” But Scripture is authoritative and binding in its own right and needs no regulation—it needs preaching!

The proof texts show the authority of Scripture but do not prove the necessity and authority of creeds from various times in church history. But Trueman asserts his creedal imperative by use of equivocation. He summarizes his own

claims:

In chapter 1 I made the point that creeds and confessions are predicated upon the truth of a number of assumptions: the past is important, and has things of positive relevance to teach us; language must be an appropriate vehicle for the stable transmission of truth across time and geographical space; and there must be a body or an institution that can authoritatively compose and enforce creeds and confessions. (Trueman: 79)

He asserts some matters that all of us who are conservative Bible believers would affirm. But his last claim puts us in new territory. Yes, the Biblical writers in the past gave us important truth using language that can transport this truth across time and space. But this does not imply that the institutional church later in history can rightly “compose and enforce creeds and confessions.” None of the passages cited by Trueman made either the claim that the church was an institution as understood later in church history or that it must have the power to enforce its confessions and creeds (even with the caveat that the Bible must “norm” these creeds, Trueman: 80). He calls the creeds “normed norms” once adopted by churches as their statements. This is a rather erudite sleight of hand, but a sleight of hand nevertheless.

Trueman rests his “imperative” ultimately on what he cannot prove was indeed imperative from the perspective of the New Testament. I affirm that creeds have been developed in church history. I affirm that various truths can be found in creeds developed in church history (like the early Christological creeds that are rightly held in high regard). But church history is part of providence and providence contains good and evil. What good can be learned and preached comes through using Scripture to judge what is true and good in church history. The creeds were either written by true, infallible apostles or they are teachings that claim to be derived from true apostles. Not even Trueman claims that various creeds were written by authoritative apostles and

prophets. Only Roman Catholicism does that.

Since they are not primary sources of divine revelation, but derived, they always have to be judged. Creeds are not binding because they are ancient, because many people love them or because smart, pious people wrote them. If they state various true things that can be proven from Scripture, then those truths are biblical and binding. The existence of creeds is not *prima facie* evidence that we must adopt and believe them. Trueman apparently would like it to be that way:

My conclusion is not only that creeds and confessions are plausible, given the biblical teaching, but that Paul actually seems to assume that something like them will be a normal part of the postapostolic church's life. (Trueman: 17)

"Seems to assume" hardly makes anything binding. We will see that binding and loosing based on parochial creeds is not the binding and loosing taught by Christ and His apostles.

Biblical Binding and Loosing

In a famous section of Matthew, Jesus spoke to Peter and the other disciples about binding and loosing. Jesus spoke of building His church on the rock (**Matthew 16:18**) and that what Peter would bind on earth will "having been bound" in heaven. This statement is expanded to the other disciples in **Matthew 18:18** where "you" is plural. Binding and loosing means "forbidding" or "permitting" as the case may be. I wrote CIC Issue 1³ on this topic back in 1992. There have been many misunderstandings about binding and loosing over the centuries. The Reformers battled against Rome's abuse of this with Roman Catholicism's claim of a succession of Popes going back to Peter. Certainly Carl Trueman does not support Rome's claims about the Pope or Rome's interpretation of binding and loosing.

We must make clear what is and is not binding on the church. The foundation of the church is stated here:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, (Ephesians 2:19-20)

The foundation has been laid once for all and consists of Christ the cornerstone and His apostles and prophets. Elsewhere Christ is called the foundation (**1Corinthians 3:11**). There is no conflict in Ephesians with the 1Corinthians passage since the apostles and prophets who gave us the NT spoke for Christ and this constitutes "the faith once for all handed down to the saints." There is no binding revelation after the closing of the NT canon of Scripture. There are no further authoritative apostles and prophets who speak bindingly for God. Everything taught in the church through the centuries must be judged in light of Scripture.

This means that what God has said concerning the terms for entrance into the kingdom of God and what is binding is always to be found in the Scriptures. Any further ministries in the church do not add to the body of Holy Spirit-inspired teaching. This should not be controversial for Protestants who believe in Scripture alone. This authoritative binding and loosing applies to all Christians in all ages and all geographical locations. No local church has the authority to contravene what God has spoken once for all. Various issues have always been debated, but if we can understand and logically apply what is written in God's Word we can determine what is true or false, right or wrong, and what is allowed as Christian liberty.

In our day there is an attack the perspicuity of Scripture. Postmodern teaching denies that any truth can be known and understood across various cultures and times. The Emergent movement attacked the faith by attacking foundationalist epistemology.⁴ I am seriously concerned that Trueman's approach dips into epistemological despair by pushing the process of settling issues of binding and loosing back to creeds and councils that supposedly covered all the important bases. Can ordi-

nary Christians be expected to be able to judge truth claims from Scripture alone? Trueman apparently doubts it:

Most evangelicals, for example, will typically use Bible translations, and such translations, be the NIV, RSV, ESV, or KJV, stand within established traditions of Bible translation, linguistics, lexicography, etc. Further, beneath these translations lie the original Hebrew and Greek texts; so traditions of textual understanding also underlie these translations. . . these various traditions will shape the choice of text, the way languages were learned, and the kind of choices made on matters of obscure grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. Thus, "Scripture alone," whatever else it means, cannot mean Scripture approached in a vacuum. (Trueman: 15)

Trueman, here, has much in common with the attacks on Scripture leveled by Emergent and postmodern teachers. We are supposedly naive to think we can objectively know truth from Scripture and use this knowledge to judge truth claims. We are back to a "little engine that couldn't" form of hopelessness that characterized postmodern theology.

But if we cannot realistically judge important matters about what is truly binding upon the hearts and behavior of Christians from Scripture, then can we trust that the authors of certain creeds overcame all these obstacles and found the truth that would henceforth be binding on the church? They had fewer tools to work with than we do today and did not have access to important manuscripts that are now available. Trueman does not go so far as to claim the "divines" had direct spiritual inspiration, but the implications are that they must have. How could they go back to Scripture alone and find true doctrine that is binding on the church when nowadays that process is considered nearly hopeless? Did they have pure motives while anyone today seeking the truth from Scripture alone is tainted by bad motives? Trueman implies this and his claims cannot be believed.

Furthermore, it is problematic when term “divine” is used as a title for humans. Trueman uses this term to describe those who produced the Westminster standards that he follows (Trueman: 126). This reeks of pietism and special pleading. Somehow these individuals were able to derive true doctrine from Scripture but that process is not accessible to ordinary Christians today. The special pleading does not stop there. To be “confessional” one must be bound by solemn vow (or be under elders who made such a vow) to an historical confession:

Yet it goes further than that confessions are only really confessions when they are adopted and confessed by a church. This requires at a minimum the existence of office-bearers bound by vow to uphold confessional teaching and structures and processes of accountability to ensure that the confession’s teaching is what the church actually proclaims. (Trueman: 133)

Can we believe that those who confess Christ, even at the cost of their lives, are not truly confessional unless they take vows linked to historical statements beyond Scripture produced by some version of the institutional church? We cannot. At least Trueman is not shy about making his claims. He is using terms such as “confession” in ways that the Bible does not. This is another example of equivocation.

Confessing Christ and the gospel truly, boldly and accurately has always been “confessional” in the greatest sense of the word. Many people who have a confession in the back of their hymnals or are identified with denominational creedal statements refuse to publically confess the truth of the gospel! I have written about this problem in many places, including in a book. Many churches in our area that hold to the Westminster standards in their official documents have pastors and elders who are sold out to postmodern mysticism, eastern religion and the “rights” of the immoral. They attack true gospel preachers as being intolerant and bigoted. The absurdity of Trueman’s claims

are clear when I drive by Presbyterian churches every week with their rainbow flags and other public statements affirming liberalism and socialism.

Trueman equivocates on the term “confession” and reserves it for his institutions. I do not accept that the institutional church is the church as defined by Christ and His apostles. I reject the notion that the church is carried on “from generation to generation” (his term) by the descendants of Christians. Christian children are born dead in Adam (**Ephesians 2:1, 1Corinthians 15:22**) just like all other children. He assumes that the institutional church as defined by various creeds is the same as the church defined by Scripture alone. This again, is special pleading.

Let me underscore the problem here. Trueman lists various creeds and standards that are associated with the Reformation and Protestantism. At issue is the binding and loosing spoken of by Christ and defined by His apostles. In creedalism, binding is a parochial matter. For example, consider this statement from the Missouri Lutheran Synod:

We accept the Lutheran Confessions as articulated in the Book of Concord of 1580 because they are drawn from the Word of God, and on that account we regard their doctrinal content as a true and binding exposition of Holy Scripture and as authoritative for all pastors, congregations and other rostered church workers of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. (From their denominational web site)

However, Trueman’s Westminster confession has important disagreements with the Book of Concord on issues like the meaning of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. This means that what is binding on Lutherans is different than what is binding on Presbyterians. Trueman sees no problem: “Churches are particular; they have particular beliefs and practices; and confessions give expression to that particularity” (Trueman: 133). But this means that binding and loosing are now particular, determined by groups in church history, and not determined by Christ and His apostles.

This parochial binding leads to an absurdity. A person looking for a church merely has to look around to find one that is in agreement and join it. What Christ and His apostles made binding is often not the concern of such religious consumers. But then what Christ said in Matthew 16 and 18 is meaningless. If we cannot know the mind of God, revealed once for all in Scripture, how can we validly pick and choose from uninspired documents that show up centuries later? Since children in many of the creedal denominations are baptized as infants and catechized, there is strong social pressure to stick with the family tradition, whatever it is. This is why most people born into Roman Catholic families simply do what they are told and stick with Rome. Whatever the case, the creeds rule; making judgments about matters of doctrine was already done centuries ago. But what if something is amiss in one of these parochial creeds? Is anyone allowed to question what was adopted by “solemn oaths” in the local church? Those who do are usually told, “we think you would be happier somewhere else.”

Prophecy and Judging Prophecy

It is a great loss to give up judging prophecy in the church (1Corinthians 14). It is a serious matter to give up and be satisfied to hear, “this is what we believe because we are people of the Westminster Standards” (or some other confession). Other people say, “The meaning of baptism has been debated throughout history so you cannot claim to know the truth about it.” That is what I mean by despair. We give up and just join something. But we gave up knowing truth. The Bible says that we must know the truth, can know the truth, and that the truth will set us free.

The common rejoinder to what I am saying is that people like me are arrogant and think we know all the truth, while more brilliant minds than ours have figured these matters out centuries ago. No, the claim is that the truth can be known and that truth claims amount to prophecy which can and must be judged. We should go into the arena of public debate and lay out the biblical evidence for our claims and “let the others judge.”

Trueman's claim that creeds are public while any other form of teaching is private is false. We go into the arena of public debate just as was done in Acts. Church services and Bible classes are public, and scripture is discussed and doctrine debated. That is how we learn. I have been engaged in this process for more than 40 years. If someone has a better reading or understanding of Scripture, that is our chance to learn and change (**1 Corinthians 14:29**).

Scripture was given once for all, the process of teaching and applying it goes on throughout the church age. It must be that way. Luther argued strongly for such prophecy followed by judgment.⁵ He claimed that this meant that believers with the Scriptures could judge the claims of the Pope and reject them if they are not biblical. Parochial binding done at some point in church history that cannot be challenged because solemn oaths were taken do not settle what is true and moral.

The priesthood of every believer is solidly biblical, and Luther emphasized this important doctrine.⁶ Somehow this topic never made it into Trueman's book when the issues at hand demand that it be addressed. How do we have the priesthood of every believer when church members must take solemn vows of loyalty to sectarian documents? The authority of scripture and the priesthood of every believer were bedrock Reformation doctrines. Where did they go? They were replaced by the authority of creeds and solemn vows of loyalty.

The Problem with Oaths

Taking of vows as promoted in The Creedal Imperative illustrate the folly of binding and loosing determined by creeds from church history. Jesus taught against vows:

"Again you have heard that it was said to the people of old, 'Do not swear falsely, but fulfill your oaths to the Lord.' But I say to you, do not swear at all, either by heaven, because it is the throne of God, or by the earth, because it is the footstool of his feet, or by Jerusalem, because it is the city of the great king. And do not swear by your head, because you are not able to

make one hair white or black. But let your statement be 'Yes, yes; no, no,' and anything beyond these is from the evil one." (Matthew 5:33-37 LEB)

Oaths can be used to convince others that one is serious and often times God's name is invoked in the taking of oaths. Taking an oath and then breaking it could be considered swearing falsely and taking the Lord's name in vain. For most Christians, required oaths bring Jesus' teaching to mind and raise questions. What about marriage vows? What about vows required in a court of law? If someone swears by God's name and then breaks his word, then God's name was taken in vain. This causes a lot of consternation.

Any vows that are required by civil law create an ethical dilemma regarding Jesus' teaching. Are we to obey Jesus' teaching when Paul taught us to obey civil authorities (Romans 13) who often require oaths? In the case of civil law, there are special penalties for lying under oath that may not apply to statements made not under oath. Since Jesus requires us to tell the truth even without oaths, Christians usually take the legally required oath for the sake of the civil authorities since they would tell the truth in any regard. If the marriage oath is required by civil law, then the same principle applies. Otherwise, saying "yes" to entering a marriage relationship is valid, oath or no oath.

What we need to seriously consider is Jesus' last statement: "anything beyond these is from the evil one." Satan is the accuser of the brethren and continually looks for opportunities to bring condemnation (see **1 Timothy 3:6**). Taking impertinent actions that may have unforeseen negative outcomes can create such opportunities. People who swear by solemn oath for whatever reason (such as impressing others concerning their piety) are setting themselves up for failure. Taking an oath that involves matters over which we do not have full control or concerning which unforeseen circumstances may arise can be a set up for failure. James said: "Now above all, my brothers, do not swear either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no, no, in

order that you may not fall under judgment" (**James 5:12**). Previously James warned about those who presumptively made claims about a future outcome without saying "if the Lord wills." There are things we do not know, or have yet to learn more clearly. We may have to be corrected. Adding solemn oaths does not insure a certain outcome and if change or failure comes, condemnation is the result.

Binding done by taking oaths based on creeds from church history should be normative as far as Carl Trueman is concerned:

... the minister who vows that he believes in, and will uphold, the system of doctrine taught in the Westminster Standards, is thus bound to practice and teach others to practice this principle. He is, in fact, as bound to this as he is to belief in the incarnation and the virgin birth. In other words, confessionalism is not simply about abstract doctrine; confessions also bind one to certain practices, certain ways of life. (Trueman: 129)

Therefore binding and loosing, in regard to both doctrine and practice, is regulated by documents from church history that were not written by Holy Spirit-inspired writers of Scripture. Furthermore, these documents do not agree with one another, so binding and loosing is parochial and not uniform for all Christians.

Jesus and His apostles do not determine what is bound (except in theory), and individual Christians have no liberty to prove that some creedal writers practiced false binding. The priesthood of every believer becomes a vacuous doctrine. What Luther wrote about the believer's freedom of conscience to correct error from Scripture alone no longer applies once the solemn oaths are taken. But what happens when someone takes such an oath and then learns Scripture better and finds out he has sworn to something unbiblical? That is where the condemnation comes in (as Luther was well aware).

Should we be prepared to give up our liberty in Christ and submit to the

traditions of men because certain teachers do not think we can be trusted to understand and apply the Bible? Do we really gain safety in this manner? If we are students of church history, the answer is a resounding no! Charles Finney swore an oath to uphold Westminster and then spent his career preaching Pelagianism.⁷ Taking an oath does not turn a liar into a truth teller!

The Institutional Church

A stated assumption of *The Creedal Imperative* is that the church is an institution. Here is Trueman's statement about that assumption: "There must be a body or an institution that can authoritatively compose and enforce creeds and confessions" (Trueman: 23, emphasis his). This entity, he says is the church.

We have seen, however, that composing binding doctrine and practices has been done once for all by Christ and His apostles. His "must" is yet another imperative that is not stated as such in Scripture. The Bible does not command future Christians, later in church history, to compose creeds and confessions (of their own) and enforce them as binding. Roman Catholicism had done that for centuries up the Reformation. This process was rejected by Luther, who taught the authority of Scripture and the priesthood of every believer. The term "church" is not used in the Bible to describe the type of institution Trueman claims as imperative.

Trueman defines institution: "By 'institution' here, I mean a self-consciously organized body of people who identify with a cause (what we now call 'church membership') and who acknowledge a structure of ministerial authority" (Trueman: 66). This is not a bad concept in regard to a local congregation, but he continues and reveals more of his idea:

Yet the Bible clearly lays out a structure of authority in the church that is traditional in the above sense [traditional institutions that carry forwards ideas and structures], in that a key part of its authority lies in the handing on of truth from one generation to the next via established power structures. (Trueman: 66)

Here is the chasm between the church as defined in the New Testament and the institutional church. The church described and defined by Christ and His apostles is created through supernatural regeneration, while the institutional church is mostly carried forward by natural generation. This does not mean that creedal Calvinism or Lutheranism does not see the need for regeneration. But it does mean that their institutions are continued into perpetuity by the children of church members more than through converts from elsewhere. The creeds and confessions force people to take oaths to believe and uphold what the unregenerate do not have any true desire to follow. Social pressure from church elders and peers often provides the motivation.

The fact is that Christ building His church is always through supernatural regeneration. Election is not genetic. God saves Jews and Gentiles, creating the "one new man" (**Ephesians 2:15**). Christians raise their children, teaching them the truths of the Christian faith. But not all come to faith. Many do not. Those who are born of God will be just as motivated to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord as are any others who know Christ, from any background. But the desire to create an institution that will keep the children of believers in line from generation to generation whether they are saved or not is what ultimately creates institutional apostasy.

But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. (1 Corinthians 2:14)

Institutions can command that future generations belonging to them hold to their creeds and confessions (by taking solemn oaths) but they cannot make the unregenerate love the truth. Eventually they kick up their heels and demand the things of the culture, and the institutions figure out how to accommodate the process without actually rejecting the creeds.

Those who are born of God love the things of the Spirit because the Scriptures were inspired by the Holy

Spirit who indwells those who know Christ. Clear, pure, Bible teaching always causes true Christians to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. The Reformers were right to call the Word of God, a "means of grace." Those who love Christ rejoice when their elders reject the trends of the culture and rebuke wickedness done in the name of religion. This is not necessarily true of the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of believers. Eventually these descendants, if they are converted, have to leave the institutional church to find fellowship with other believers. This reality is hard to miss when studying church history. Institutional churches, including creedal ones, adapt to the culture and eventually persecute those who love the truth.

Trueman, however, believes that the creeds and confessions will keep the people belonging to them in line and safe from damaging cultural trends. He writes:

Paul has a high view of the church as a body and as an institution. This has been reflected, sometimes excessively so, in church history from Ignatius onward. Yet the fact remains that respect for the authority of the church and respect for the creeds and confessions which churches adopt must become an important part of our contemporary Christian lives if we are to be truly biblical. (Trueman: 177)

This again amounts to begging the question. I do not see Trueman giving strong biblical proof that Paul promoted the institutional church as understood later in church history. What we do know about the church from Scripture alone defines the church much differently. Paul clearly predicted that the time would come when people would turn away from the truth:

Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires,

and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. (2 Timothy 4:2-4)

The antidote was the preaching of God's Word and strong exhortation. The answer was not institutions with creeds, dogmas, traditions and confessions that did not exist in Paul's day. There are no more authoritative apostles and prophets after the death of the Biblical ones. Scripture alone is our means to rebuke those who claim to be Christian but follow error and myth.

Conclusion

Trueman's institutional church that will create its own, future, creeds and confessions which will then become what is binding and effective to preserve the faith is not the church defined by Christ and His apostles. The mere adopting of a creed in church history does not make it true or binding. Frankly, some people are going back to Rome, reasoning that if we need an ancient institution with creeds, dogmas, traditions, councils and so forth, why not go back to the oldest one? In America, TV ads beckon people to "come home" to Rome. Many respond.

Throughout my nearly 50 years of being a Christian, most of those I have known and fellowshiped with as dear brothers and sisters in Christ were saved out of institutional churches. I was saved a few years after I left such a church as a teenager. When I was required to take a class in preparation to join the church at age 12, I had serious questions, such as the existence of miracles in the Bible. During those years three different ordained ministers told me that there were no miracles, that the Bible was written to give us inspiring stories to help us be better people and that I should not neglect my religion to that end. Ironically, when I had to stand before the congregation at age 12 to join, I had to swear that I believed things (like the resurrection of Christ) that the pastor privately told me he did not believe. When I got old enough I left.

Then, at age 20, sitting in an organic chemistry class at Iowa State University, I saw irrefutable evidence that there was a transcendent Creator who created everything out of nothing.

Three months later I was supernaturally converted through the witness of Christians. If the Bible taught that the church was an institution that perpetuated itself through creeds and confessions sworn to by the descendants of previous generations of nominal Christians, I would just assume that those pastors were insincere or apostate. I would go back and try to get it right.

But the Bible does not teach this sort of institutional church that exists through generations of people born into Christian families. When I met Christ I found fellowship with others who rejoiced in the truth and were hungry to learn. There has been much to learn in those 50 years, and the learning process continues. Those who, like the Bereans who searched the Scriptures to see if these things were true, are willing to be corrected by Scripture. We do not assume that some people centuries ago were more brilliant and pious than we can be. If they learned the truth from Scripture, then Christians in any future era of history can too. That is the essence of the authority of Scripture and priesthood of every believer.

Carl Trueman's "imperative" is not a Biblical imperative. We have shown that. He could possibly argue that he has liberty in Christ to affirm various creeds, having found them to be Biblical. That is certainly the case in regard to the early Christological creeds. He does have liberty to use terminology that came from church history as a way of speaking about true doctrine that guards against heresy--like "trinity" of the "hypostatic union." We all have that liberty and should use it. Groups that reject the early formulations of the doctrine of Christ are rightly considered heretical when they deny the trinity or the humanity and deity of Christ. It is also necessary for teachers to be able to articulate any key truth or the doctrine of Christ directly from Scripture and to teach others.

Carl Trueman does not have the liberty to falsely bind Christians to his understanding of the institutional church or comprehensive creeds that actually need to be discerned point by point. He does not have the authority to demand oath-taking and thus trouble the consciences of believers who want to obey

Jesus Christ, who taught not to take such oaths. There is no imperative to creating creeds at some later point in church history and then demanding obedience to them by solemn oath.

I mean no disrespect for the great teachers of the church, too many to number, who have belonged to institutional churches with creeds and confessions. The great teachings provided by such people will remain hugely valuable as long as church history continues. However, the true "imperative" is to remain solid in the faith, once for all handed down to the saints. This means that Scripture, not church history, defines the church.

End Notes

1. Carl R. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012)
2. Simply stated, the imperative mood in the Greek is a command or instruction. The indicative affirms what is, the subjunctive mood concerns probability or likely possibility. For example, "you shall not steal" is given as a command (imperative). If it were stated as that fact about a person it would be, "he does not steal" (indicative). If it were a possibility or probability it would be, "it seems like he might not steal" (subjunctive).
3. See CIC Issue 1 Binding and Loosing
- 4 I address this in my book, *The Emergent Church, Undefined Christianity*. It is still in print and available on Amazon.com
- 5 See CIC issue 95, *The Prophetic Calling of Every Believer*
- 6 CIC issue 133, *The Priesthood of Every Believer - How Luther Recovered Biblical Priesthood*
7. see CIC issue 53, *Charles Finney's Influence on American Evangelicalism*

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