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Historically, outsiders to Churches of Christ have noticed the great unity and uniformity of faith and practice that characterize our fellowship. As Frank Mead put it, in his classic *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, “Since the status of [their] institutions is unofficial, none authorized to speak for the entire church, their conformity in ideas and teachings is all the more remarkable.” That is, despite the lack of institutional, denominational superstructure or adherence to a written confessional standard, Churches of Christ have traditionally maintained a surprisingly strong sense of identity. This common identity is exemplified in the common observation that, until the late twentieth century, one could walk into almost any Church of Christ and predict exactly what would be done and said.

This characteristic identity, reflected in a relative uniformity of doctrine and liturgy, has noticeably eroded over the past few decades. Now, those who enter an assembly of the Church of Christ can no longer predict with the same degree of accuracy what they will find. A variety of cultural and religious factors have further loosened the ties that once maintained the unity of belief and practice in this loose affiliation of congregations. It is important, therefore, for members of Churches of Christ to reflect on issues related to our identity—past, present, and future.

In this issue of *Christian Studies*, we have asked contributors to keep in mind the very broad but important question about the identity of Churches of Christ. This question thus serves as a general thread that runs through the various articles. In their own way, and sometimes with different results, these articles touch on this concept by indirectly addressing questions such as: What has shaped the identity of Churches of Christ in the past? How can this identity be characterized at present? What does, or should, its future look like? What beliefs and practices are, or should be, central? What is, or should be, our relationship with other denominations, with evangelicalism, and with the world? All these questions, and more, are worth our contemplation, and the articles included in this issue are intended to initiate or extend such conversations not only among Churches of Christ, but among other groups who are wrestling with similar questions.

For many reasons, the faculty of Austin Graduate School of Theology wishes to dedicate this issue of *Christian Studies* to David Worley. Dr. Worley has donated his time, energy, and resources to the ministry at Austin Grad, including service to the school as president (1992–2000) and as chancellor (2001–present). In addition to being a New Testament scholar, he is a model shepherd and an outstanding example of Christian devotion and piety—exhibiting unity in necessary things, charity in all things, and patient endurance in trials. More specific to the theme of this issue, as long as I have known him, David has been a tireless advocate for preserving and passing on to others what is best about Churches of Christ, and he does so in a winsome, non-sectarian way. It is our hope that this issue reflects something of his interests and integrity, that he is honored by the questions and tentative answers found here, and that all readers will find the enterprise stimulating and edifying.

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Confessions of Faith in the New Testament

Jeffrey Peterson

Growing up in a Church of Christ near Houston, the most characteristic statement I recall hearing about “creeds” or “confessions of faith” was a negative one, that as a communion we were not guided by the Apostles’ Creed or the other historic confessions of Christendom. But I also recall two positive statements. First, it was suggested that the church had “no creed but the Bible.” This statement did provide a clear indication of the source of religious authority. In practice, however, the Bible makes an awkward creed, as it is too large to demand that converts have an extensive knowledge of it, and issues of interpretation quickly arise that prevent its serving the function of defining the boundaries of a communion (to mention one function creeds have historically served).

The second positive statement was a commendation of the Ethiopian eunuch’s confession, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (Acts 8:37 KJV), as the model for what believers should affirm in response to the gospel before being baptized and as the basis for the actual practice of baptism. It is noteworthy that even in a “non-credal” communion, value was seen in a summary of the Christian faith succinct enough to be employed in the initiation of converts so as to impress upon them the fundamental commitment they were making, to which they could presumably be recalled if the need arose (though I do not recall seeing the baptismal confession used in this way).

The use of Acts 8:37 proves awkward for Christians who seek to be guided by the New Testament once it is recognized that this passage was a scribal

addition to the text, as indicated in all recent translations.¹ If we survey the Scriptures, however, we will find throughout the New Testament canon brief summaries of the faith employed for various purposes. Consideration of these and their use among Jesus' earliest followers may increase our appreciation for later creeds and confessions of faith and the uses which disciples after the first century found for them.

The Synoptic Gospels

We first meet such a confession of faith in the Gospel accounts of the ministry of Jesus. The first three Gospels (called the "Synoptic" Gospels because they offer significantly parallel accounts of Jesus' ministry) all relate, as a turning point in their narrative, Jesus' questioning of his disciples about the popular opinion of him and then about their own understanding (Mark 8:27–30; Matt 16:13–20; Luke 9:18–21).² Jesus quizzes the disciples at the conclusion of the first phase of his public ministry, in which he has repeatedly said and done things that lead those who witness them to raise the question of his identity—as the disciples ask earlier in the Synoptic narrative, after Jesus stills the storm, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4:41 ESV; cf. Matt 8:27; Luke 8:22).

The answer to Jesus' question varies slightly in the three Synoptic versions, but they agree on the main point. Mark's narrative records the simplest answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answers, "You are the Christ" (Mark 8:29 ESV)—the "Messiah" (NRSV), the Anointed

¹J. W. McGarvey gamely argued that "[t]he fact that it is interpolated does not prove that the eunuch did not make the confession" (*A Commentary on Acts of the Apostles, with a Revised Version of the Text* 7th ed. [Lexington: Transylvania Printing and Publishing Co., 1872], *ad loc.*; on line at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/mcgarvey/acts.ch8.html>, accessed 24 March 2016).

²This essay gives priority to Mark among the Synoptics, noting differences in Matthew and Luke where significant, because I agree with most New Testament scholars that Mark was the first Gospel written, and that Matthew and Luke both made use of Mark's work in composing theirs. I give my reasons for holding to this conclusion in my essay "Order in the Double Tradition and the Existence of Q" in *Questioning Q: A Multidimensional Critique*, edited by Mark Goodacre and Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 28 n. 2; on line at <http://austingrad.edu/images/Resources/Peterson/Order%20in%20Double%20Tradition.pdf>.

One, chosen by God to rule as king over his people and inaugurate the age of blessing anticipated in the prophecies of Scripture (e.g., Isaiah 11:1–10). Peter’s answer as recorded by Luke—“the Messiah of God” (Luke 9:20 NRSV), or “the one anointed [and so chosen] by God”—makes explicit what is implicit in the title “Messiah”: the coming of this king and the blessings bestowed by his advent are the work of the Creator who chose the tribe of Abraham and pledged to make his descendants an instrument of blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1–3).

In Matthew’s account, Peter’s confession is elaborated still further: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16 NRSV). This offers further explication of the term “Messiah,” whom Scripture describes as God’s “son” (Psalm 2; cf. 2 Sam 7:12–14; 1 Chron 17:11–14). The Judaism of New Testament times had a creed of its own, a daily profession of faith opening with Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and known as the *Shema* after the first word of that passage in Hebrew.³ In the form in which Matthew records it, Peter’s confession incorporates the fundamental conviction defining the faith of Israel with the new revelation that Jesus is the one through whom all of Israel’s hopes in God will be fulfilled.⁴ As in Luke, the elaboration of the confession in Matthew draws out the implications of the simple statement recorded in Mark, “You are the Messiah.” These implications would have been evident to anyone formed in a Jewish milieu, but spelling them out was necessary in the course of a mission to Gentiles, to which Matthew’s Gospel looks forward (Matt 24:14; 26:13; 28:18–20).

Matthew’s account also makes it clear that this confession is foundational to the community Jesus would form through his ministry, death, and resurrection. After declaring Peter blessed because of his confession, Jesus utters the much-discussed statement, “I tell you, you are Peter [*Petros*, Rock], and on this rock [*petra*] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades [death] will not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18 NRSV). Whether the “rock” to which Je-

³ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Company, 2003), 561.

⁴ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr. suggest that this may represent “a redactional addition inspired by the tradition of the trial before the Sanhedrin, where Jesus is adjured ‘by the living God’ to say whether or not he is ‘the Christ the Son of God’” (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, vol. 2 International Critical Commentary [New York: T&T Clark, 2004], 620).

sus refers is Peter's confession of faith or Peter himself is a famous point of dispute between Protestant and Catholic interpreters. Matthew's Gospel in fact offers some support for both interpretations.⁵ But the confession is crucial, for it is only as the one who acknowledges Jesus as Messiah and Son of the living God that Simon the fisherman comes to embody the new name Peter that Jesus bestows on him.

In all three Synoptic Gospels, the confession serves to summarize what is revealed about Jesus and his role in God's saving purpose in the whole story the Evangelists tell, from Jesus' anointing with the Spirit of God at his baptism (Mark 1:9–11; Matt 3:13–17; Luke 3:21–22), to his manifestation to the disciples (cf. Mark 9:2–10; Matt 17:1–8; Luke 9:28–36), to his crucifixion and resurrection (Mark 14–16; Matt 26–28; Luke 22–24). Further, the Evangelists make clear that it is only when the confession is uttered with the whole story of Jesus in mind that it can form the foundation of Jesus' new community. This is shown in the immediate sequel to the confession, in which Jesus instructs his disciples about the suffering, death, and resurrection that await "the son of the Man" in Jerusalem, where they must now go.⁶

Also in all three Synoptic Gospels, this confession as elaborated in Jesus' instruction is made the basis of the community's ethics. After instructing the disciples on his own destiny, Jesus declares that any who wish to follow him must also take up the cross and give up their lives for Christ's sake in order to find life and be vindicated at the last judgment (Mark 8:34–38; Matt 16:24–27; Luke 9:23–26). Disciples of Jesus are called to live in imitation of and tes-

⁵ For the OT background supplied by Abraham's being renamed (Gen 17:1–8) and designated Israel's originating "rock" (Isa 51:1–2), see Davies and Allison, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 623–24. Matthew presents the authority that Peter will exercise in Jesus' church (16:19, where the pronoun "you" is singular) as shared with all the apostles (18:18, where "you" is plural), and the Gospel contains no indication that Peter's role within the Twelve was one that could be transferred to another.

⁶ Luke offers the briefest account of this instruction (9:21–22). In both Mark (8:31–33) and Matthew (16:21–23), Peter protests Jesus' description of his fate, so that having rightly confessed Jesus' identity as Messiah, he is rebuked in the strongest terms for failing to accept what Jesus' service as Messiah will involve. On the significance of the phrase usually translated "the Son of Man" (*ho huios tou anthrōpou*), and on "the son of the Man" as a better translation (as the former leaves untranslated the second of the definite articles that always appear in the phrase in the Gospels), see Joel Marcus, "Son of Man as Son of Adam," *Revue biblique* 110 (2003): 38–61, 370–86.

timony to the Messiah who entered into glory by way of suffering, and thus prepare to stand before God.

The Letters of Paul

In the letters of Paul, we also find Jesus designated “Messiah” and “Son of God” in summary statements of the gospel (e.g., Rom 1:3–4; 8:3–4, 32; 9:4–5; 2 Cor 1:19; 1 Thess 1:9–10). Perhaps the best known of these is Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8. As Paul’s introduction suggests (vv. 1–3a), and as Richard Bauckham has convincingly argued, this passage does not quote a credal statement recited by converts as part of their Christian initiation, but rather draws selectively on a summary of the message Paul himself preached in Corinth (and elsewhere), which his converts “received” (NRSV et al.) in a manner that the summary itself does not specify.⁷ The subject of the main verbs in the summary is “Messiah” (*Christos*, v. 3b), and the summary itself covers much the same ground as Jesus’ instruction to his disciples concerning the destiny of the messianic “son of the Man.”

Yet in Paul’s letters another summary appears with greater prominence. Writing to converts in Corinth, Paul sums up his missionary message in the statement, “We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim *Jesus Christ as Lord* and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor 4:5 NRSV, my emphasis). In 2 Corinthians, Paul recalls his preaching under this summary formula as part of an attempt to help his converts in Corinth view his ministry in the right perspective and respond appropriately to his continuing exhortations, his aim throughout the letter.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul shows how this summary of his preaching relates to the experience of converts who hear the gospel and are called to respond. This appears in the following passage in the third major section of the letter (chaps. 9–11).⁸

⁷ See Richard Bauckham, “Kerygmatic Summaries in the Speeches of Acts,” in *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts* ed. Ben Witherington III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 185–217, especially 211–12. For the confession made by those who accepted Paul’s preaching, see the discussion of Rom 10:6–13 below.

⁸ On the argument of Romans, see John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 449–561.

The righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart [Deut 9:4; cf. Deut 30:12], ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” [Deut 30:12; cf. Prov 30:4]—that is, to bring Christ down—“or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” [cf. Psalm 107:26, 106:26, Greek version]—that is, to bring Christ up from the dead. But what does [Scripture] say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” [Deut 30:14]—that is, the word of faith that we proclaim. For if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame” [Isa 28:16, Greek version]. For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” [Joel 2:32, 3:5, Greek version] (Rom 10:6–13 NRSV, modified).

As the bracketed references above suggest, Paul here presents a complex interpretation of one central scriptural text (Deut 30:12–14), amplified by other biblical passages, in the manner of ancient interpreters of Jewish Scripture.⁹ He finds in the Scriptures a description of the preaching of the gospel by apostles like himself and of the response that converts make to it.¹⁰

The response that converts made to the preaching is presented in two brief statements (Rom 10:8–10), one (“Jesus is Lord”) confessed “with the mouth,” the other (“God raised him from the dead”) embraced “with the heart.” The two statements are closely related to one another, as the confession of Jesus as “Lord” draws on early Christian interpretation of Psalm 110:1 (“The LORD says to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool,’” NRSV), according to which the first “lord” mentioned in the psalm is God the Father and the second is Christ at his resurrec-

⁹ For an informative introduction to ancient interpretation of Jewish Scripture, in counterpoint with modern, see James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007).

¹⁰ As Romans was sent to a congregation that Paul himself did not found and had no prior contact with (cf. 1:8–15; 15:22–24), the elements of conversion that the letter presupposes its recipients to have experienced (cf. 6:3–4) must also have characterized non-Pauline missionary efforts to Gentiles. That this was the case for Jewish converts as well is suggested by 10:12.

tion.¹¹ Paul's contrast between confessing with the lips and believing with the heart suggests that in the process of accepting the apostles' message and being added to the community, converts would cry aloud, "Jesus is Lord," while also giving mental assent to the proclamation that God raised him from the dead; in light of the interpretation of Psalm 110:1 noted above, the former was likely understood as an indication of the latter.

Converts, thus, did not recite all they had learned and come to believe through Paul or another missionary, but they verbally affirmed Jesus' lordship and thus indicated their acceptance of the message. In his letters, Paul refers to this acclamation not only to recall in summary form the message that his converts had embraced in becoming Christians, but also to suggest the obligations that their acceptance of this teaching implied. Thus, in opening his discussion of the proper use of spiritual gifts in the Corinthian assemblies, Paul states the principle that "no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus is accursed'; and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3 NASB); the Corinthians can employ this as a benchmark to evaluate the degree to which their assemblies are guided by the Spirit for the benefit of the body and all its members (cf. 12:12–31; 14:4–5).

Similarly, in introducing the main section of the letter to the Colossians, Paul recalls how the recipients initially "received Christ Jesus the Lord" and challenges them to "so live in him" (Col 2:6 RSV) before reviewing the obligations they embraced by receiving baptism into Christ (Col 2:8–4:6). Embracing Christ as "Lord" involves taking on the responsibilities of living as his "servants." In acknowledging the sovereignty of Jesus Christ the Lord, Christians anticipate the age to come, in which "at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, ... and ... every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10–11 NASB). The confession of Jesus as Lord thus sums up the whole life of converts, from the time they hear and respond to the gospel until they enter into God's consummation of his saving purpose for them and for all creatures.

¹¹ See Donald Juell, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992), 135–50.

The Letters of John

In the letters of John, written a generation after Paul's letters, we see a further development in the use of summary statements of the faith suitable for confession by converts. The Christians John addresses are plagued by false teachers who have fostered schism (1 John 2:19) and "denied that Jesus is the Christ" (1 John 2:22 NRSV). In arming them against this threat, John calls his addressees to maintain a firm grip on the message they were initially taught: "Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father" (1 John 2:24 NRSV).

When he comes to specific tests for distinguishing true teaching from false, what John offers resembles the principle that Paul offered his converts in 1 Corinthians 12:3: "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God" (1 John 4:2–3 NRSV).¹² Here the core of the faith is defined very much as in the passages considered above, but to counter the false teaching with which John's audience must contend, the original confession of Jesus as the Christ is specified to affirm that he truly came among us "in the flesh." This was implicit in the apostolic confession that "Christ died" (1 Cor 15:3), but now the circumstances of the community require a more precise definition of the faith that was preached and received, though still one brief enough that it can be used to determine whether to admit visiting teachers to the community or not: "Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching" (2 John 10 NRSV)—namely, the teaching "that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (2 John 7 NRSV).

Conclusion

Throughout the New Testament, we see the community that was formed by Jesus' ministry and which continued after his death and resurrection employing brief summaries of the faith in preaching, the instruction and initiation of converts, the shaping of the community's life, and the opposition of

¹² Stephen S. Smalley notes the parallel with 1 Corinthians 12:3 (*1, 2, 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary 51 [Dallas: Word, 1989]), 222, 224.

false teaching.¹³ In the Jewish context of Jesus' earthly ministry, the confession of him as "Messiah" and "Son of God" was sufficient to define the central conviction that united his disciples, the significance of which they had yet to learn. The first converts after Jesus' death and resurrection confessed him as "Lord" and so expressed both the exalted status to which God had raised him and the claim he exercised on their lives. When still later some teachers denied the bodily reality of Jesus' life and death, the confession was elaborated to specify that the risen Jesus confessed as Messiah had "come in the flesh," so that false teaching could be recognized.

It was through the use of these confessional summaries, which reminded the first converts to the gospel of the church's fundamental convictions and obligations, that the apostles formed the earliest communities gathered in Jesus' name for faithful living in a social environment that presented daily challenges to their decision to follow him. The social environment in which we are called to live out the faith has much in common with that of the first Christian converts and those who came after them before the reign of Constantine and his embrace of the Christian Church in the fourth century AD. The development of a "proto-credal" tradition within the canon suggests that Christians who seek to be guided by the New Testament should give careful consideration to later credal formulations and the purposes for which the Christians of the second and later centuries employed them as they also sought to follow in the path marked out by Jesus and the apostles.¹⁴

¹³ For an overlapping consideration of this question in the New Testament and further reflections for Restorationists, see Abraham J. Malherbe, "Creeds and Their Uses: The New Testament," *Christian Studies* 14 (1994): 5–18 (online at <http://austingrad.edu/Christian%20Studies/CS%2014/Creeds.pdf>).

¹⁴ As Bauckham comments, the "kerygmatic summaries" of which he finds examples in Paul, Acts, and early second-century sources resembled "the creeds and the 'rule of faith' (which were in some sense derived from them) in the later second- and third-century church" in that they "functioned in any context where a succinct summary of the kerygma was needed" ("Kerygmatic Summaries," 188). For the development of this tradition in the second and third centuries, see Everett Ferguson, *The Rule of Faith: A Guide* (Eugene: Cascade, 2015).

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