Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

As I mentioned a moment ago, we will begin a sermon series following the topics of the Canons of Dort. And the Canons of Dort is a confession of faith. And we also recited the words of the Apostles’ Creed earlier in the service. And if you have worshipped here a few times, you will have heard reference to creeds and confessions. So, you might be wondering what are these creeds and confessions? And even if you do know what they are, you might be wondering why we give them so much attention? Why are the creeds and confessions part of the basis of *membership* in our church? Do we really need confessions? Isn’t the Bible enough?

Well, the word ‘creed’ comes from the Latin word *credo*. Credo means “I believe.” So, a creed is a generally brief statement of beliefs. And a confession is a longer summary of biblical teachings. And so, as a confessional church, we have adopted three creeds (Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian) and four confessions of faith (Heidelberg, Canons, Belgic, and Westminster) as summaries of Biblical teaching.

But again, the question remains: Why? **why are we a church of creeds and confessions**? That is the main question we want to consider today. And we will do this, first of all, by considering the **Biblical Rationale** for Confessions, and then, secondly, the **Triple Purpose** of Confessions.

1. So, first of all, the **biblical rationale** for confessions.
   1. Earlier in the service we read from **Deut. 6**. And there, parents, and especially fathers, were commanded to teach their children about God and about His great works of deliverance, every day. Now, back then, individual families did not have Bibles at home. What was taught was all oral and from memory. And to keep the knowledge of God and His saving works and His law alive among God’s people, we read in **Leviticus 10** that it was the duty of the priests and Levites to instruct the people from the law of God.
   2. Well, fast forward to the time of the Judges and this is what we read in **Judges 2:10**: “*And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that He had done for Israel*.” And what can we infer from this sad summary? That priests and parents had failed to teach the next generation about God and His law. There was no round the dinner table instruction, there was no preaching, there were no catechism classes, there was no memory work, there were no Bible studies, there were no church history lessons. And we see the fruit of this failure in the Book of Judges. It was a horrible time of idolatry, injustice, and immorality.
   3. Well, thankfully, the Lord raised up prophets, like Samuel and Elijah, and kings, like David and Joash, who saw to it that the people were instructed in the law of God. And the fruit of this teaching was increased knowledge and godliness. But these times never seemed to last long. And eventually, we get the time of the so called ‘minor prophets, where we see that the knowledge of God and His law has disappeared and there was widespread wickedness, again.
      1. Here is one example from **Hosea 4:1-6**.

*Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel, for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed …Yet let no one contend, and let none accuse, for with you is my contention, O priest. You shall stumble by day; the prophet also shall stumble with you by night; and I will destroy your mother. 6 My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge … And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.*

Do you see where the Lord pointed the finger of blame? At the priests and prophets. It was their failure to teach the law of God to the people that was why evil was flourishing.

* 1. Well, perhaps you have heard this saying before: The first generation does what it does and knows why it does it. The second generation does it, but it does not know why it does it. And so, the third generation stops doing it. And this is exactly what we learn from the Old Testament. We must teach our children *who* God is, How He has worked salvation in Christ, and How we are to live.
  2. And that brings us to the New Testament. We know that God is Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – one God in three persons. We know that all three are co-eternal and equal in majesty. We know that Jesus Christ is fully human and fully God. We know that He died and rose again for the forgiveness of our sins. We know that He ascended to heaven and that He will come again to judge the living and the dead! We know that He and the Father have sent the Holy Spirit to live in each believer and to apply in them all the benefits of salvation in Christ. We know that each believer is to be baptized into a local congregation, where he or she sits under the preaching of God’s word and partakes of the Lord’s Supper. And we know how we must live in view of God’s mercies to us in Christ. And we know all this because it is in the Bible. But it isn’t always there in the exact words or the precise way I have just said it. For example, the word Trinity is not found in the Bible. And for the first 3-400 years of the early church, there were huge debates about whether Jesus was fully God, or fully human, or eternal. And certain texts of the Bible, taken out of context, or not interpreted with other Scriptures, were used to promote all sorts of views. And this led to creeds and confessions.
  3. And **we see an example of this** **already in Scripture**. So, look again at **1 Timothy 3:16**. The Apostle Paul was writing to Timothy who was the minister of the congregation at Ephesus. And there were issues in the church there that needed addressing.But Paul described the church as *“a pillar and buttress of the truth*.”
     1. Many NZ homes are built on what are called **piles**. The piles are very strong wooden or concrete posts that are buried deep in the ground. And on top of the piles are strong wooden bearers. And together the piles and bearers support the whole house structure. So, the image here in verse 15 is of the church being the piles and bearers that support the truth.
     2. So, **there is a close and vital relationship between *the church* and the truth**. God has not left truth up to isolated individuals. He has connected truth with the church. And for the church to be this, it has been given the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus called the Spirit of truth. And so, in every age of the church, there have been men and women in whom the Spirit was at work. And we benefit from the work of these Spirit-filled believers in past ages.
     3. And we see **an** **example of a creed here in verse 16**. If your Bible is like mine, verse 16 is laid out differently than the verses around it. It is more like how the Bible lays out poetry than how it lays out prose. And this is done because it is widely believed that these words functioned as a very early creed in the New Testament church. Whether it was one believer or a group of believers, this basic summary statement about the person and work of the Lord Jesus had been written down and passed around.
     4. And of these words, the ESV says “*we confess*” them. The NIV says, They “*are beyond all question*.” The NAU says, They are our “*common confession*.” So, the idea here is that there was no debate about these things in the church; they were commonly believed by all. And it may even have been recited in church just like we do with the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed.
  4. But we also have a biblical example of this also in relation to our **confessions**, which go into a lot more detail about doctrine and practice. And this example is in **Acts 15**. We learn there that some men had been teaching in the church that unless you were circumcised, you could not be saved. So, Paul and Barnabas were appointed to go to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders so that this matter could be discussed. This meeting is often spoken about as the first church synod. So, after debate and discussion, the ruling of the church was that that teaching was contrary to the gospel and wrong. So, the conclusions of the meeting were written down, and several men were commissioned to visit all the churches and to read out the judgment of the church. And we are told, “*When* *they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement*.” So, this early ‘type’ of confessional instruction was received with joy by the congregations because it promoted and supported unity in the truth!
     1. And this was certainly not the last controversy that the church had to deal with.
        1. Very soon, there were the **great controversies about the** **Trinity**, and especially the person and work of the Lord Jesus, that arose through heretics like Sabellius and Arius.
        2. And of course, the **Reformation** was about important doctrines like Scripture alone and Christ alone and grace alone, and there was now the Roman Catholic church and the Protestant church. And there were great debates about the Lord’s Supper and baptism. And the church had to come together and discuss these things and write down its judgments and reflections.

1. So, there we have the **biblical rationale** for creeds and confessions. But what we have just been saying feeds into our second point, which is the **triple purpose** of creeds and confessions. And the triple purpose is to unite believers, to reveal heretics, and proclaim truth.
   1. So, first of all, creeds and confessions **unite believers**.
      1. **Rugby** is a game overseen by the International Rugby Board. There are 15 in a team and you have lineouts and scrums and referees who referee according to the *laws of rugby*. **Rugby league** is a game overseen by the World Rugby League. There are 13 in a team and a 6 tackle limit and no lineouts and fake scrums, and referees who referee according to the laws *of rugby league*. And it is the rules that unite rugby folk and rugby league folk.
      2. And in the same way, creeds and confessions unite believers. I know that you and I believe the same things, because we have publicly tied ourselves to the mast of the creeds and confessions. In a recent article about creeds and confessions in the Tabletalk devotional magazine, Michael Reeves said,

*Confessions also protect us from theological drift by binding us not only to the gospel but to our fellow confessors as well. Subscribing to a confession is both public and corporate. The prefix con- in confess means “together.” Confessions bind us together in fellowship under the gospel. Through confession, the gospel becomes our common ground and shared vision. Confessions are fundamentally unifying.*

And Reeves went on to say,

*Without this [public and shared] commitment, it is much easier to shift allegiance without even noticing. Confessional commitments make it difficult to change our minds on the fundamental matters of the confession. [Thus] Confessions help define and protect our theological identity*.

* + 1. So, the confessions are what we confess and what we have committed ourselves to keep confessing, together with our fellow members. We have promised, in the Lord’s name, to only be part of a church that shares this confessional commitment.
  1. But secondly, creeds and confessions help to **reveal heretics**.
     1. A heresy is a belief that is contrary to official church beliefs. And a heretic is a person who holds to and teaches heresy. In **2 Timothy 2:16-18**, Paul said to Timothy, “*But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some*.” And in **1 Timothy 1:19-20**, Paul told Timothy to hold “*faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme*.” So, these men were heretics who taught false doctrine and were upsetting the faith of others through their teaching. And they needed to be called out and put out of the church.
     2. And the same must be done to heretics today. And confessions help us recognize heresy, because the truth is laid out for us in black and white.
     3. Back in 1957, here in NZ, a Presbyterian minister named **Lloyd Geering** faced a heresy trial in the Presbyterian Church. He was teaching that Jesus was not born of a virgin, that He did not rise, bodily, from the grave, that salvation is not about the work of Jesus on the cross, that God is not a supernatural being but just a force in all of us, and that when we die, we cease to exist. So, heresy charges were brought by people in the Presbyterian Church who were committed to biblical truth. But here is what happened at the heresy trial in Geering’s own words:

*Before there had been very much time for any adequate discussion of the real issues, a motion was put to the House, and later carried firmly on the voices – and it said that “the Assembly judges that no doctrinal error has been established, dismisses the charges and declares the case closed*.

And so, Geering continued to serve as a minister and a theological professor at Otago and Victoria Universities. Four times he has received an honour from the NZ government for services to religion! And a few years ago, there was an article in Stuff that celebrated him as New Zealand’s “honest heretic.”

But the influence that this man has had in the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand and further beyond has been devastating! And he is 103 years old now, so if he does not repent and believe, he will soon stand before the God he has denied and face judgment for his heresy.

* + 1. So, Brothers and Sisters, if I or anyone else stood in this pulpit and taught things like Lloyd Geering taught, I hope you would all be speaking to your elder and asking the session to deal with such heresy, seriously. And the creeds and confessions are a great help in identifying heresy.
  1. Well, thirdly and finally, creeds and confessions help us **proclaim truth**.
     1. The author of another of our confessions was a man named Guido deBres. And soon after he completed the **Belgic Confession of faith**, he sent a copy to King Philip II, of Spain, together with a petition in which he and the other petitioners declared that they were ready to obey the government in all lawful things, but that they would “offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to fire,” rather than deny the truth expressed in this confession. So, he wanted the King to know what the Reformed church believes.
     2. And you can do this with your neighbour or work colleagues. If they want to know what you believe, you don’t have to sit at a keyboard and try and come up with a summary of your beliefs; you can give them a green book or send them a link to the creeds and confessions.

Well, by way of conclusion, have you ever used a **map** to get to a destination before? Why? Why didn’t you just start out and head in the general direction in the hope that eventually you would arrive where you needed to be? And the answer is obvious, isn’t it; we are not the first ones to travel. Others have travelled before us and they have put maps together that give reliable directions to help us get to the desired destination. Well, one author suggested that we think of the creeds and confessions as a kind of map. He said, “The Bible is a beautiful and vast world of mountains, rivers, and paths, and we are called to climb them, navigate them, and walk them as we look to, learn from, and lean our forefathers who have travelled them faithfully in generations past.”

So, let us benefit from the maps given to us by our spiritual forefathers. They are not the destination – that is life in Christ now and life with Christ in the age to come. And they are not the Bible. And they do not tell us everything about everything. But so long as we understand this, they unite believers, they reveal heretics, and they proclaim truth.

So, let us be thankful for and make use of the creeds and confessions of the church of Christ! Amen.