

The Error of Making Creeds, Not the Bible, the Rule of Faith

A Response to Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes' Defense of the "Open Letter" and Critique of the Christian Research Journal's Reassessment of the Local Churches

In their article criticizing the Christian Research Institute's reevaluation of the "local churches," Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes claim that the local churches "refuse to accept the orthodox creedal statements on the Trinity."¹ In endnote 3 they wrote, "A doctrine is said to be aberrant if it undermines or is in significant tension with the orthodox beliefs of the historic Christian faith as based in the Bible and expressed in the early Christian creeds." By making the creeds the authoritative expression of biblical truth, Geisler and Rhodes actually make the creeds a higher rule of faith than the Bible. This is irresponsible at several levels. Geisler and Rhodes:

1. Implicitly fault the local churches for taking the complete Bible as their unique standard of truth, instead of the incomplete creeds.
2. Explicitly demand the use of creedal language as a yardstick of orthodoxy.
3. Accept as orthodox many other Christian groups that do not take the creeds as their standard of truth.
4. Ignore the many affirmations of "orthodox" beliefs regarding the Divine Trinity that pervade the teaching of Witness Lee and the local churches.
5. Ignore Witness Lee's extensive and balanced commentary in which he affirms many points of truth in the creeds but also points out their shortcomings.
6. Practice hypocrisy given Geisler's own disavowal of binding authority for the creeds.

Our Standard of Truth—The Bible, Not the Creeds

From the very inception of the ministry of Watchman Nee in China and of the local churches established there, we have consistently taken the stand that the Bible, not the creeds, is the unique standard of the truth. Watchman Nee wrote:

The Bible testifies of itself: "All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for conviction, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, fully equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). For man to consider the creeds as authoritative is for him to annul the authority of the Bible! It causes man to take the creeds as the standard instead of taking the Bible as the standard!²

If creeds were necessary, God's wisdom surely would have prepared an infallible one. God's love would surely not have forgotten such a thing and would not have held it back from the church. The fact that God did not give us such a creed shows that such a creed is useless. On the contrary, God has given man a Bible... The condition for understanding the Bible is not great knowledge, great wisdom, or profound study, but a single-hearted desire to be a man of God. Even the poorest and the most foolish man can do this. As a result, it is possible even for him to understand the Word of God. If believers would be men of God in position and in conduct, it would not be difficult for them to understand the Bible.³

Geisler and Rhodes implicitly criticize this position by insisting on the acceptance of creedal statements as the standard of orthodoxy. They fail to explain how acceptance of the Bible as the ultimate rule of faith is in error.

Explicitly Demanding Use of Creedal Language as Proof of Orthodoxy

Geisler claims to have sent a letter to Ron Kangas, editor-in-chief of the Living Stream Ministry publication *Affirmation & Critique*.⁴ This letter is attached to the article posted by Geisler and Rhodes criticizing CRI's reassessment of the teachings of the local churches. In his letter, Geisler criticized the following excerpts from a statement of faith printed near the front of the journal:

Holding the Bible as the complete and only divine revelation, we strongly believe that God is eternally one and also eternally the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, the three being distinct but not separate.

and:

We confess that the third of the Trinity, the Spirit, is equally God.⁵

In the following statements Geisler makes the explicit use of the word "person(s)" in reference to the Trinity a requirement for orthodoxy:

First, if you desired to be considered orthodox in your "Statement of Faith," then why did you leave out the word "person" of the three members of the Trinity. To be orthodox you should have said "three [persons] being distinct" and "we confess the third [person] of the Trinity."

Judged by Geisler's standard, the Bible itself is not orthodox, and neither are the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed, as none of them use the word "person" when speaking of the three of the Trinity. Furthermore, in Geisler's letter to Ron Kangas, Geisler proffers the following definition of heresy:

Based on biblical usage, the word heresy refers to a divisive teaching or practice that is contrary to the historic Christian Faith as based on the Bible and expressed in the early Christian creeds.

This definition is itself absurd. How could the "biblical usage" of the term "heresy" refer to something as "expressed in the early Christian creeds," which did not even exist at the time of the completion of the writing of the Bible? Geisler's criticism exhibits a preoccupation with formulaic expressions rather than a proper discernment of biblical truth, and it supplants the words of the Bible with those of the creeds.

A Double Standard: Others Who Do Not Take the Creeds as Their Standard of Truth Are Accepted as Orthodox

When Geisler and Rhodes criticize the local churches as unorthodox for not taking the creeds as their unique standard of truth, they ignore the fact that many great Bible teachers and Christian groups that are accepted as orthodox take the same standing. These Christians also recognized that the creeds produced by the ecumenical councils, although they made a significant contribution to the protection of the church from the incursion of heresy, should never replace the Scriptures as the rule of faith among the believers:

Augustine:

I ought not to oppose the Council of Nice to you, nor ought you to oppose that of Ariminum to me, as prejudging the question. I am not bound by the authority of the latter, nor you by that of the former. Let thing contend with thing, cause with cause, reason with reason, on the authority of Scripture, an authority not peculiar to either, but common to all.⁶

Martin Luther:

Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God.⁷

John Calvin:

Be this as it may, we shall never be able to distinguish between contradictory and dissenting councils, which have been many, unless we weigh them all in that balance for men and angels, I mean, the word of God.⁸

But the Romanists have another end in view when they say that the power of interpreting Scripture belongs to councils, and that without challenge. For they employ it as a pretext for giving the name of an interpretation of Scripture to everything which is determined in councils.⁹

The Westminster Confession of Faith:

All synods or councils since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice.¹⁰

The principle of *sola Scriptura*, of the Bible as the unique and ultimate authority in matters of divine revelation, has been an important guiding principle for the church since the time of the Reformation. As R. C. Sproul states:

[The Reformers] insisted there is only one written source of special revelation, the Bible. This is the *sola* of *sola Scriptura*. The chief reason for the word *alone* is the conviction that the Bible is inspired by God, while church creeds and pronouncements are the works of men. These lesser works may be accurate and brilliantly conceived, capturing the best insights of learned scholars; but they are not the inspired Word of God.¹¹

Speaking of some who measured orthodoxy by adherence to the Westminster Confession, Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, made the following very weighty argument:

Recent articles published in defense of sound doctrine have quoted the Westminster Confession for authoritative evidence as much as or more than the Word of God. Men are branded as heterodox who disagree at any point with this Confession. Having declared in ordination vows that he believes the Bible to be the *only* infallible rule of faith and practice, how can a minister go on to assign infallibility to the Westminster Confession? And if the Westminster Confession is accepted as fallible, could that acceptance be interpreted as any more than one of general agreement? Even the drafters of the Westminster Confession did not expect their statement to supplant the Scriptures. They wrote: "The authority of the Holy Scriptures; for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the Author, and therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God." Indeed, it is not a long step from the

Protestant claim that a man is heretical who does not accept in toto some dictum of the Protestant Church to the imposition of Rome which is to the effect that the dogmas of the church are equal in authority with the Scriptures. The theologian who draws his proof as much from the standards of his church as from the Bible is slipping from the true Protestant position. To a student whose conception of doctrine is gained from firsthand searching of the Scriptures, **the confessions or creeds, though appreciated for what they contain, are nevertheless characterized by what they do not contain. An overweening devotion to creedal statements may easily lead to a neglect of much important truth which is outside the range of those creeds.**¹² [emphasis added]

Witness Lee pointed out several groups that affirm “no creed but the Bible”:

Although the creeds are good, they are incomplete and even considerably incomplete. In 1828 the Brethren were raised up by the Lord. After discovering the inadequacy of the creeds, they declared that they wanted no creed but the Bible. The incompleteness of the creeds is primarily due to the inadequate knowledge concerning the Divine Trinity. Following the Brethren, those in the Baptist denomination also declared, “No creed but the Bible.” Then another group, the so-called Church of Christ, also made the same declaration. The fourth group of people to make such a declaration are those who are in the Lord’s recovery. Sixty years ago when we were raised up in China, we also declared, “We do not care for the creeds; we care only for the Bible.”¹³

Of what he calls “the Anabaptist view” Geisler himself has said:

Most Baptist, Congregationalist, Charismatic, Mennonite, Free Church, and Independent Church traditions come from this tradition. Many in this tradition had great respect for the Apostles’ Creed and were evangelical in their central doctrinal beliefs, but they rejected any ecclesiastical authority, holding strongly to the view that the Bible alone has divine authority. This did not mean that they believed that confessions had no value, or that the early creeds did not contain essential orthodox doctrine. It simply means that they believed that only the Bible is infallible and divinely authoritative.¹⁴

If Geisler and Rhodes condemn Witness Lee and the local churches for taking the Bible and not the creeds as the rule of faith, they must also condemn the Brethren, the Baptists, the Congregationalists, the Charismatics, the Mennonites, the Free Churches, the Independent Churches, the Church of Christ, and all others who take the same standing.

Ignoring the Local Churches’ Affirmations of the Truth Concerning the Trinity

Geisler and Rhodes would have their readers believe that Witness Lee and the local churches deny the biblical revelation of the Triune God. They withhold from their readers the many affirmations of the basic truths concerning the Divine Trinity in the teaching of Witness Lee and the local churches, of which the following are a small sampling:

Holding the Bible as the complete and only divine revelation, we strongly believe that God is eternally one and also eternally the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, the three being distinct but not separate.¹⁵

We believe that God is the only one Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—co-existing equally from eternity to eternity.¹⁶

Using human terms, we may say that there are three Persons in the Godhead, one God with three Persons. I can't explain this. I can only say that God is triune, that we have one God with three Persons.¹⁷

Among the three of the Divine Trinity, there is distinction but no separation. The Father is distinct from the Son, the Son is distinct from the Spirit, and the Spirit is distinct from the Son and the Father. But we cannot say that They are separate, because They coinhere, that is, They live within one another. In Their coexistence the three of the Godhead are distinct, but Their coinherence makes them one. They coexist in Their coinherence, so They are distinct but not separate.¹⁸

What the Bible mainly reveals to us is our wonderful God. This God is uniquely one (Deut. 6:4; 1 Cor. 8:4b; Isa. 45:5a) yet triune—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, who coexist simultaneously, from eternity to eternity, and are each fully God. Yet there are not three Gods, but one God in three persons. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not three temporal manifestations of the one God; rather, They exist eternally, distinct but not separate from one another.¹⁹

We affirm that the most fundamental declaration in the Bible concerning God's being is that He is one God (Deut. 6:4; Isa. 45:5; Psa. 86:10; 1 Cor. 8:4; Eph. 4:6; 1 Tim. 2:5). Yet He is also revealed to have the aspect of three: in the Old Testament He refers to Himself in both singular and plural terms (Gen. 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; Isa. 6:8), and in the New Testament the explicit designations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are used (e.g., Matt. 28:19; Gal. 4:6; cf. 2 Cor. 13:14). Contrary to the commonly held notion that the three are separate and individual persons, thus implying three Gods, we hold that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are three hypostases, or persons, distinct though not separate, of the one indivisible God. We affirm that the three are each equally God: the Father is God (1 Pet. 1:2; Eph. 1:17), the Son is God (Heb. 1:8; John 1:1; Rom. 9:5; Titus 2:13; John 20:28), and the Spirit is God (Acts 5:3-4). We also believe the scriptural testimony that each of the three is equally eternal: the Father is eternal (Isa. 9:6), the Son is eternal (Heb. 1:12; 7:3), and the Spirit is eternal (9:14). Hence, we understand the three to coexist eternally. We do not hold to the notion that the three distinctions in God are temporal or economic modes of His existence which successively begin and end as He accomplishes the successive steps of His economy in time. In witnessing to Their coexistence, the New Testament often portrays the three as operating together simultaneously in the harmony of one manifest action (Matt. 3:16-17; John 14:16-17; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 3:14-17; Rev. 1:4-5). The biblical data convince us, therefore, that the three of the Divine Trinity coexist from eternity to eternity and are each fully God without being three separate and independent persons. Mysteriously, the one God is three.²⁰

Ignoring Witness Lee's Extensive and Balanced Commentary on the Creeds

In keeping with their practice of not performing primary research, Geisler and Rhodes completely neglect Witness Lee's extensive and balanced commentary on the creeds in *The Revelation and Vision of God*, a book cited twice in Elliot Miller's article in the *Christian Research Journal*:

According to church history, the earliest creed is the Apostles' Creed. This creed originated with a group of church fathers, who were all Bible scholars, in the beginning of the second century shortly after the passing away of the apostles. Based upon the apostles' teachings, they made a thorough study of the truth concerning the Triune God in the Bible in order to give a definition to the Divine Trinity. They were serious and accurate in their study, and the items they set forth may be considered quite deep, thorough, and detailed. The only shortcoming is the incompleteness of the contents.²¹

Furthermore, although the Nicene Creed contains no heresy and is actually not bad, it is still incomplete in its contents, since there were seven books [of the New Testament] that had not yet been authenticated as authoritative.²²

However, even though this revised creed [the revised Nicene Creed of 381 A.D.] is richer than the earlier Nicene Creed in contents and likewise contains no error or heresy, it is still incomplete in that seven books of the New Testament had yet to be recognized.²³

Concerning the early church creeds, Witness Lee makes the following points:

1. The earliest creeds were limited by the fact that several books of the Bible had not yet been canonized.
2. The creeds are incomplete in that they neglect at least fifteen points concerning the Trinity that are clearly stated in Scripture.
3. The Chalcedonian Creed contains a great heresy, calling Mary the "Mother of God."

On this basis, he concludes:

Besides the heresy about "the Mother of God," there are no other gross errors in the creeds; in fact, many of the items in the creeds are quite accurate. Nevertheless, all the creeds, besides containing some errors, are incomplete. Hence, they cannot be our rules of faith but can serve only as references.²⁴

Any fair reader can see that the criticism Geisler and Rhodes make that we "refuse to accept the orthodox creedal statements on the Trinity" is unfair. They clearly did not read *The Revelation and Vision of God*, even though it was cited twice in Elliot Miller's article. In fact, Geisler and Rhodes claim that "there is really no new evidence available since CRI did its first research," when there is ample evidence that the opposite is true, but this evidence was ignored.

Stark Hypocrisy

Even worse, the accusation made by Geisler and Rhodes is starkly hypocritical. Just two years earlier Geisler himself wrote:

Many churches in Christendom deny the authority of any council, though they agree with many things stated by them, particularly in the early ones. This they do by insisting strongly that only the Bible has binding authority. All creeds and confessions are man-made. Thus, no authority is attached to any church councils, whether they be local or so-called universal councils. This view is called *solo Scriptura* by Keith A. Mathison in contrast to the Reformed view of *sola Scriptura*, since the latter read the Bible in the light of the early Fathers and creeds whereas the former do not.

By holding a free church view, **as we do**, one does not need to deny there is any value to the creeds and councils. It is simply that there is no authority in them, either divine or ecclesiastical. In fact, all orthodox Christians, Catholics and non-Catholics, agree with the basic doctrines affirmed in the earlier so-called ecumenical councils, such as the Trinity, virgin birth, deity of Christ, and Christ's hypostatic union of two natures in one person. The main concern of orthodox Christians is with attributing any divine or even ecclesiastical authority to creedal and conciliar pronouncements.²⁵ [emphasis added]

To require affirmation of a creedal formulation as proof of orthodoxy concerning the Trinity is to apply a double standard, something which Elliot Miller repeatedly pointed out as the practice of the Christian countercult apologists in their critiques of the local churches.

Conclusion

Applying the standard of creedal conformity as a litmus test of orthodoxy undermines the authority of the Bible. It subordinates the authority of the Bible to the creeds. This is something every believer in Christ should reject. While we respect the efforts of the early church to define what they believed in the face of many distortions of the revelation in the Bible, it is the complete Bible itself that must be the rule of our faith and practice.

Norman Geisler claims to hold this opinion himself, yet he criticizes Witness Lee and the local churches for taking the same standing. Geisler and Rhodes failed to address either our plain affirmations of the common faith or Witness Lee's careful evaluation of the creeds. These omissions are particularly troubling given Geisler and Rhodes' disparagement of the need of more research, such as that performed by CRI.

¹ Norm Geisler and Ron Rhodes, "A Response to the Christian Research Journal's Recent Defense of the 'Local Church' Movement," 2009.

² Watchman Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee, vol. 5: The Christian (3)* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1992), p. 448.

³ Watchman Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee, vol. 5: The Christian (3)* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1992), pp. 492-493. The latter part quoted is strikingly similar to the following portion from Calvin's *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*:

...the Holy Spirit so tempers His style as that the sublimity of the truths which he teaches is not hidden even from those of the weakest capacity, provided they are of a submissive and teachable disposition, and bring with them an earnest desire to be instructed. (John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms, vol. 2*, translated by James Anderson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 229.

⁴ Ron Kangas has no record or recollection of having received this letter.

⁵ "A Statement of Faith," *Affirmation & Critique, XIII:1*, April 2008, p. 2.

⁶ Augustine, quoted in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, vol. 2*, translated by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 407.

⁷ Martin Luther, quoted in Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1950, 1983), p. 144.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, vol. 2*, translated by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 408.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 411.

¹⁰ *The Creeds of Christendom, Vol. III*, ed. By Philip Schaff, rev. by David S. Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1931, 1993), p. 670.

¹¹ R. C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown: The Heart of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), p. 43.

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- ¹² Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, rev. ed. (Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1936, 1951), pp. 16-17.
- ¹³ Witness Lee, *The Revelation and Vision of God* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 2000), p. 43.
- ¹⁴ Norman Geisler, "The Essential Doctrines of the Christian Faith (Part 1): A Historical Approach," *Christian Research Journal*, 28:5, 2005, p. 32.
- ¹⁵ Living Stream Ministry, Statement of Faith, www.lsm.org/lsm-statement-faith.html.
- ¹⁶ *The Beliefs and Practices of the Local Churches* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1978), available at www.contendingforthefaith.org/responses/booklets/beliefs.html
- ¹⁷ Witness Lee, *Life-study of Genesis* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1987), p. 61; first published in 1974.
- ¹⁸ Witness Lee, *The Crucial Points of the Major Items of the Lord's Recovery* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1993), pp. 10-11.
- ¹⁹ Various brothers representing the local churches and the editorial section of Living Stream Ministry, "A Brief Response to 'An Open Letter to the Leadership of Living Stream Ministry and the 'Local Churches','" February 11, 2007, available at www.lctestimony.org/ResponseToOpenLetter.html and in book form at [www.contendingforthefaith.org/eBooks/Open Letter Response \(1\).pdf](http://www.contendingforthefaith.org/eBooks/Open%20Letter%20Response%20(1).pdf).
- ²⁰ Various brothers representing the local churches and the editorial section of Living Stream Ministry, "A Longer Response to 'An Open Letter to the Leadership of Living Stream Ministry and the 'Local Churches','" December 7, 2008, available at www.lctestimony.org/LongerResponse.html and in book form at [www.contendingforthefaith.org/eBooks/Open Letter Response \(1\).pdf](http://www.contendingforthefaith.org/eBooks/Open%20Letter%20Response%20(1).pdf).
- ²¹ Witness Lee, *The Revelation and Vision of God* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 2000), p. 44.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 47. The books of Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, and Revelation were not officially canonized as authoritative books of Scripture until 397 A.D. at the Council of Carthage, although they were known and used in the churches before that date.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- ²⁵ Norman L. Geisler and Joshua M. Betancourt, *Is Rome the True Church?: A Consideration of the Roman Catholic Claim* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), p. 52.