

God's Design in Denominations and Their Benefits in a Unified Body of Jesus Christ
(9 Aug 15)

“Till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Ephesians 4:13.

Just the other night I asked if I could listen in on a conversation between two strangers. I'd come to get a pop out of a machine just behind them here in the California mountains of the National Training Center (NTC) and overheard them talking about the Book of Revelation. I wanted to listen in. I made it a point to say nothing, but just to listen. The principle speaker was a zealous fellow who repeatedly demonstrated a lack of understanding regarding the book he was attempting to speak on. First off he called it the Book of “Revelations.” One of the fastest ways to show you don't know the book is to call it Revelations. A question soon came from the listener to which he replied to the effect that it “...didn't really matter what you did with the Father, only the Son.” He mentioned how God, “Spoke to him” personally, and how his church spoke in tongues “rightly” but that he wasn't all that into it. He also later talked to me of how Christians sin if they eat pork. This man's theology was riddled with error. What truly prompted me to write this letter, however, was a combination of time being afforded to me and his affirmation of something I've heard far too many times before. How he “avoids the doctrines of men” in his life. He spoke of how he just “sticks with the Bible” and that “the Bible is his only creed,” etc. He had an allergy against confessions, denominations and creeds. He referred to anything outside the Bible pejoratively as “doctrines of men.” The problem, of course, is that we're all just men. Everything he believes is an interpretation that he, a man, has made. The only question is whether or not our interpretations are correct, not correct, or perhaps simply most correct. Why are so many Christians in my generation opposed to confessions of faith or denominationalism? Most don't even understand the difference between a denomination and a religion conceptually let alone could they identify what makes one differ from another. When I speak of confessions I mean things as historically respected and denominationally benign to us as the Apostles Creed as well as other more denominationally geared stuff like the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 (my favorite), the Westminster Confession of Faith, The Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Book of Concord, The Baptist Faith and Message, Together for the Gospel, etc. A great link for a lot of great stuff can be found at <http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/creeds.htm>. I also go so far as to mean any local church's website's written statement of faith which is something that's become very prominent today. Many in my generation put no stock in such writings and so have never read them. I think this shortchanges us and unnecessarily leaves us blowing in the wind against many of the devil's wiles. We waste a lot of time reconstructing the wheel.

Men are fallible indeed. Just because something was once written in a confession or faith statement does *not* mean that it's true. The Council of Trent was a Roman Catholic confession that took a huge assembly of learned men nearly twenty years to pen (1545-63), but it's completely wrong. It's ultimately useless as an instruction in righteousness. It's an instruction in

unrighteousness actually. A written article's author or authors may have been completely wrong. I want to admit that right up front. In the case of the true church, however, it's not a matter simply *that* something was written, or that something was written by a someone or group of someones, but that it's biblical. This will always bring each generation of reader back to a personal need to know the Bible for itself. If a confession therefore can be proven biblical then it should be handed down and be trusted. There is no avoiding the fact that wrong creeds and confessions are also handed down, but here I stand, right? We can do no other. God help us all. Amen. The only way we can contend for one writing over another is by a personal knowledge of the Bible, 2 Timothy 2:15.

Perhaps it's our inherently pseudo-experiential and elusively deductive culture that makes us so suspicious of other men's writings regarding religion. Perhaps today we're aware of the sad reality that if we today were to again attempt to assemble all the minds in our land to discuss some great doctrine or another that we'd probably just not get anywhere with it. Because of our privileged digital age we are deceptively resourced thinking we know a lot when we really don't. This is wrong, but more dangerous than just being wrong. It is subtly wrong and centers around the fact that people today are increasingly more convinced that there are *no* absolutes we can know for sure. Even some Christians fall prey to the idea that you should never be too sure about what you believe. That you should always remain "open minded." There is a wisdom to this, truly, but it can also be a very worldly and unwise thing. The proliferation of ideas today in our digital age brings 1.8 million plus articles on virtually any subject to our fingertips via a Google search instantly making us all bona-fide "researchers" on any topic inside five minutes. I can't tell you how many people I've spoken to that have "researched" Christianity yet erroneously categorize Mormons, Catholics and Protestants in the same tradition. Clearly they have not researched it at all. Most people in my culture become convinced of their own opinions beyond all doubt if just one other person on the web affirms it. Of course there'll always be 10,000 others to affirm anything on the web. Seeing a video on it, and that some professor out there agrees with you should not make anyone certain of anything, but it does. Such a culture is then stooped in nothing more than itself being convinced that it's researched (but a five minute Google search isn't research), and that it's experienced (but we're really not) because we've never gone beyond our own armchair bubble. Our receipt of information is tailor made for us because we string search it out online. There is such untouched value then in going outside of ourselves and seeking the opinions of others, especially perhaps outside of our own generation. I want Christians to be strengthened by doing so, so we must go to the past. You will find a lot of wrong opinions out there, especially in our day, but you'll also find right opinions out there throughout history because of the promise of what we're going to look at next.

The Holy Spirit is the teacher of the church and the church is any solid body of believers anywhere. He is the one who guarantees that the gates of hell never prevail against it, Matthew 16:18. He has never and will never come close to failure here. *He imparts a wisdom that is transferrable from disciples to others. This is key.* We can actually know and teach the truth to each other by his grace. Parents are to be trusted to teach their kids rightly according to the Bible, Ephesians 6:4; Proverbs 22:6; Titus 2:3-5. The Scriptures are able to make each and every believer wise and fully equipped for work, 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Ministers shepherd their flocks

being accountable in their own souls to God, Hebrews 13:17. All of these truths assume that regular ole humans (non-inspired individuals like you and me) are able to receive from God's word all that is required, can be trusted to rightly apply it in our lives, codify it if necessary and communicate it to others. Should we not then be trustworthy in writing it down with specifics? Enter sound creeds. Now, if God is indeed the teacher of his church, and he is, then it is foolishness to assume that he was not doing so in previous generations through the written confessions of its leaders. The church has to respond to her antagonists for the sake of the sheep. This happens across every sound denomination and in response to various things. We have an excellent model given to us for them. Let's start by seeing the process worked out in the Bible from beginning to end.

The quintessential example of how confessions work is found in the Bible itself. In Acts 15 a dispute arose regarding the doctrine of circumcision. Some Jewish teachers were approaching Christians and telling them that being circumcised was required or else you weren't really a Christian, Acts 15:1. The idea that *any work* is required as a prerequisite to one's pardon for sin is at the root of a great many false religions that have arisen against the gospel. This was a big issue and divisions arose as a result. Anyone who taught it, even if they claimed to love and follow Jesus, were to be rejected as heretics and anathematized because they were teaching another gospel not based on grace. Paul wrote his letter to the Galatian church dealing with this issue specifically in great detail in their region. Anyway, this was no small issue in Jerusalem in those days. It was bothering a lot of people and undoubtedly some Christians were being confused. I'm sure a myriad of Bible verses were presented in favor of the view. The Apostles had personally engaged some of these false teachers and seen their errors. In Acts 15:2 we read: "when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question." This was a big issue so the church came together to deal with it. My first point here is that to varying degrees, each question is worth addressing at some level. This one dealt with one's understanding of the faith in its entirety so it called for all the Apostles to deal with it in an assembly. In vs. 6 Scripture says, "Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter." They disputed with proponents of this heresy like crazy for an undisclosed period of time. What was the end result of the church's gathering? They wrote a written confession on the matter for everyone else to read that they could reach. Vv. 22-23: "Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, *namely*, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. They wrote this *letter* by them: the apostles, the elders, and the brethren, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. Greetings..." The letter goes on to state the exact position reached by the leadership on the matter. It was very clear that circumcision was not a prerequisite to saving faith. So, there arose a dispute, they debated it, decided on their side of it, codified it, and sent it out to instruct all its readers about the truth(s) of the matter. This letter would unite where it was to unite, and it would also divide where it was to divide. Both sides were its intent! It was sent to several places in a few regions and to Antioch where there was a big Gentile church. There would be people there on the side of circumcision as a requirement. They would be condemned by the believers in Antioch. What would be the deciding factor? One's response to the letter or confession of faith

written by the Apostles. The written confession became the divide. This is how they are supposed to work. The only difference between the confession written in Acts 15 and the one written by my denomination today is the office of the writers.

There's no doubt in my mind that cowardice today also plays a huge part as to why so many Christians in my generation are denying written creeds, confessions and absolutes. We simply don't want to offend anyone. We want everyone to like us. The less specific we are in what we believe the easier that gets. The Bible tells us that we should study to be approved before God and thus not ashamed yet the moment you assert you know anything as the result of study, even in the church, if someone disagrees or is offended (oh no) most Christians today will reply how "knowledge puffs up." One word that should remain completely absent from a description of my generation is "noble." We are politically correct wimps. Nevertheless, what we see in Acts is how it works. The sober will be truthful in kindness. Now, we today are *not* Apostles. There are no Apostles today no matter how apostolic one's ministry may be. Those same first Apostles are *directly given*, via their writings, to every new generation of believer. I am a student of St. Paul today as much as anyone who's only has his written letters. No one today speaks with the kind of universal authority that the Apostles spoke with. Not exactly anyway. God does not speak through us in the exact manner he once did through them, however, if I say "Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth" then I'm delivering an eternal truth that was only first inspired through the Apostles. I would not have known it had God not first spoke through them, but they would be the first to remind anyone that their truth is not really theirs either- it's God's. To deny me if I say this is therefore to deny far more than just me. To deny me, even though I myself am wholly dispensable, is likely to deny the truth of my statement and thus to deny the Apostles and thus also Christ Himself. John 13:20 and the truth that "...he who receives whomever I send receives Me..." applies to every single believer via our reflexive authority. What do I mean by "reflective or reflexive authority?" Basically, I just mean in line with while never usurping the authority of the Apostles and their doctrine. We call their doctrine the New Testament. This is why we'd better be right when we speak! We are not to do it on our own authority. They spoke on the authority of Christ and so do we. Our authority today as non-apostles to declare anything right in a faith statement against anything wrong is a reflective authority given to us only as those who uphold and rightly divide the Bible itself. We do this along with all the others that've been rightly dividing it before us. *Perhaps one of the main reasons why we shy away from written confessions today is that we're afraid or unwilling to accept this kind of responsibility.* We are cowards who "just believe the Bible." If God is our teacher, however, we should not fear. Each generation of the church is the keeper of the faith in their generation for generations to follow. The Apostles laid it down and we uphold it as a secondarily reflexive authority of Jesus' message that was first inspired through them. We are members of the same body today. That will require newly articulated writings against newly formulated lies. All secondary confessions should work like mirrors of the Bible at some specific point to uphold the whole. As mirrors we simply seek to reflect some part or another of the Bible to others regarding the text in its entirety or in regard to just some aspect of life or faith in question. The Apostles developed the New Testament in sound interpretation of the Old Testament. We now have a solid understanding of the whole thereby. God had them "starting from scratch" in writing inspired revelation (actually putting pen to parchment) from Matthew to

Revelation. We don't start from scratch in the same way. We don't write Scripture. Now, in some ways we do have to start from scratch. For example, no one in the Bible's narratives was challenged by Darwinism. Our written responses, should you consider such writings a confession of faith to whatever degree regarding origins, would be from scratch because we're answering a "new" question even though we're doing it from the Bible. I put "new" in quotes because there's really nothing new under the sun. The Apostles did the same with regard to circumcision under Christ. Circumcision's place in the New Covenant was a "new" question that they had to answer. In this we can see how the church's role must certainly persist under Christ's authority. Questions have always and will always continue to arise but Scripture is now a closed book. To say "we just believe the Bible" is to do no apologetical service to those we intend to reach. We must answer. They don't know the book or its God. Ultimately it's true that we just believe the Bible, but that word has every answer needed contained in it. We can offer that. Confessions help. Denominations help. We will never have nor do we need any more written revelation, but we will have to develop new answers to new questions. Gnosticism was once a "new" question. A written confession helped us all in response. Arianism was once a "new" question. A written confession helped us all in response. Romanism was once a "new" question. A written confession helped us all in response. Liberalism was once a "new" question. A written confession helped us all in response. Word of faith ideology or the prosperity gospel is now a "new" question. Written confessions are helping and will help. Denominations and their confessions help us do that. Some church leaders may be the first to address a "new" question, write something helpful for the church at large, and therefore that denomination may be the first to engage into a specific debate. Its specific concoction of ideas, geography or typical audience may be the catalyst for its ministers being the first to confront a specific false idea. Denominations, as varied as they are, can thus help us answer a varied culture's questions.

In the days of the Apostles there was no written stance against circumcision from the Christian perspective. They had to "come up with it." God guided them to a sound understanding of the subject. We today don't "come up with things" in the same way they did. If the Scripture is not clear on something we cannot be, but when the Bible is clear we may draft faith statements that are equally authoritative and therefore may be equally divisive. We have an all sufficient and inerrant Bible. We know this. If the Scripture is clear on something we must be clear on it. We are not Apostles, but we too are entrusted with "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints, Jude 1:20. "Saints" extend beyond the apostolic era. A saint is anyone born again. We too are taught to rightly divide the word, and we can. We are commanded to know what we teach and why. If Judaizers arise today teaching the kind of things that those in that day taught we must rise up against them. We will do this based upon the Bible's completed revelation. We are therefore fallible people dealing with absolutes in a relativistic world. We shouldn't be shy of that. We should accept the responsibility with humility, passion and conviction. The Bible may not, for example, specifically address homosexuality in light of a monogamous relationship between consenting adults as many enemies of the faith today declare is okay, but there is enough in the Bible given that we can take a stand against such ideas with sobriety and certainty. We therefore may develop a faith statement against monogamous homosexuality, but it is only to reflect what the Bible says on sexuality as a whole already. The issue demands the response. The Bible is crystal clear in its opposition to homosexuality in any form. There is no doubt that God

condemns it. As the proponents of it have risen up we must respond, as we have, with clear written statements that educate our people, and seek to uphold the truth. Those confessions will unite where they are to unite, and they will divide where they are to divide. Our written confessions won't be totally new like the Acts 15 apostolic confession against circumcision as a prerequisite to saving faith, but they will be equally authoritative because we know that homosexuality destroys a soul as much as seeking out one's justification through the works of the law. Another reason we today shy away from confessionalism, as eluded to earlier, is that we feel that all divisions are negative. They're not.

There is good division and bad division. Scripture demonstrates both. Perhaps an examination of both may embolden Christians today to not fear all division as bad. If we stop arrogantly assuming that we can get it right alone better than with the guidance of yesteryear then maybe we'll start seeing written confessions more as means to unity than as means to division. My hope is that many in my generation of the church will begin to despise the kind of "unity" we love to create, namely a unity based not on doctrine. Perhaps we'll see that even though our unity is truly in the Holy Spirit, that that must lead us to a unity in doctrine. That's just how he does it. We can then maybe start to see how the doctrines of men, of which such things are, are given to the church by God for a purpose. Truth divides and that's okay. We cannot be afraid to divide because of what we believe. This doesn't mean we've given up or are no longer striving to maintain truth. Sometimes truth is just that important. I think there's a direct link between our shyness toward confessionalism and our allergy to judgment. We must understand what our boundaries are in judgment. Any affirmation of truth is already a judgment of sorts against whatever it opposes.

Who hasn't heard the "judge not" retort before? We will hear this if we're serious about anything in the word. Someone in fornication who has read the Bible is quick to tell you, "the Bible says don't judge me" if you mention their sexual sin. Tupac Shakur once rapped "Only God can judge me" while living an absolutely reprehensible lifestyle. We have run with this as a culture in my generation, but is this true? Can God alone judge? Many today latch onto the "don't judge" idea. See, if I can create a culture where nothing is judge able then it fosters an environment for any and every evil impulse. It's even more subtle because it seems to do so "under love" and "tolerance." This was the motto of the 60's drug and sexual revolutions in America and it is an idea very much alive and well today. As Christians, however, we do not merely deal with relative ideas and so we're called to judge. We have to. Only someone serious about the faith would ever dare to do so. Even just deciding that someone needs to hear the gospel is a manner of judgment since deciding they need to hear it is to assume that they're lost and without hope outside of Christ. We deal with absolutes. We need sober men and women to do so. This judgment must begin with us first who are members of the church. Judgment changes pretty dramatically whether we're talking about believers or unbelievers. What do we do with the following from Paul? 1 Corinthians 5:9-13: "I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly *did* not *mean* with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an

extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. For what *have I to do* with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore “put away from yourselves the evil person.” Far from being a “judge not” call, this is a call for judgment among believers. How many of us would not eat with a person who calls them self a Christian yet has sex outside marriage? We all know one. I believe that this passage applies most closely to people in our local assembly. We’re supposed to abstain from food with people we judge as immoral. If we’re serious about Jesus we will do so. How many pastors are teaching this one? This passage goes so far as to even call the church to kick people out of the church if needed. Most people, even if they understand this passage (which was clearly applied in 1 Corinthians 5:5) would call me unloving for writing about it. We are judgeaphobic today in the church. Perhaps it’s because we think we’re judging on our own authority. We also confuse the form of self-righteous judgment condemned in the Bible with all manner of judgment. Paul’s call to judgment is also not just a call to the pastors; it’s a call to every member of a church. How could we ever love God enough to obey this command? Well, we must know what we believe. We must be committed to the truth. We must be able to fix our judgment on extortion based on God’s definition of extortion in the Bible. We must fix our judgments against sexual immorality on God’s condemnation of sexual immoralities in the Bible. My point here is that judgment is commanded and necessary in our churches. Divisions and matters of judgment should not be feared when prayer and definite Bible truths are the grounds for dispute. Written confessions that articulate the resolved issues of a day help us to formulate our own responses more clearly today. This is another benefit of studying and having confessions. I think our churches hallways should be lined with them. Written confessions can be forever growing. We should be loving, we should be patient, and we should invite men to repent, but we must judge based on the Bible. We must or we’re hypocrites. Division over the kinds of things Paul called for division over here would not be a bad thing. In fact, sound judgment and division shows obedience and love. Who among us would not bless the man who turned us from our sin by correcting us while we were still in it? What if a written confession helped point us to the Bible truth upon which such a judgment was based? What a blessing it would be then!

Whether we’re talking about dividing in the church over allegiance to a true prophet over another, or dividing a hundred years later with another group by finding ourselves on opposite sides of a previous argument worth upholding we must be firm or we falter. I’m talking about divisions in and outside the church right alongside with this talk on confessionalism because the two are inseparably linked. Doctrine does divide. It does. It divides and it unites, however. I pray we see that latter. Let’s look more at this for a moment.

In St. Paul’s polemical Corinthian letters he begins with an admonition against trivial divisions in their church. What I cited above in chapter five would not be of the type he would be against. It seems that some of the people were claiming obedience to some Apostles over other Apostles. In 1 Corinthians 1:10-13 we read: “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and *that* there be no divisions among you, but *that* you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe’s *household*, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, “I am of Paul,” or “I am of

Apollos,” or “I am of Cephas,” or “I am of Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” Their division was wrong and apparently over something pretty crucial. They were dividing the Apostles, but both Peter and Paul spoke the message of Jesus. Neither were false prophets. They both spoke by the same authority, were commissioned by the same source, and were heralds of the same message. We’re not shown any point in their teachings that called for even any temporary division as may have been the case outlined in Galatians 2:11-16 and Peter’s corrected temporary hypocrisy. To divide them in the way they were in Corinth showed carnality not a sincere interest in truth. Now, however, comes my question: To divide between Paul and Peter was silly. Yes. It was wrong. Maybe even sinful. But how about if the people in Corinth were dividing over Paul and Hymenaeus? What then? What if some in Corinth said “I am of Paul” and others said “I am of Hymenaeus?” Would division be wrong then? Absolutely not. Paul refers to the message of Hymenaeus and Philetus as cancerous in 2 Timothy 2:15. Cancer kills. The word used in the Greek here for “cancer” (NKJV) is where we get our word gangrene from. You don’t want to side with them doctrinally. If that dispute occurred in Corinth and the followers of Paul and the followers of Hymenaeus were to both draft faith statements then one’s acceptance of one or the other would instantly put anyone on that particular side of the matter. The writing equals the proponent. Some literally abandon the faith and suffer shipwreck as Paul put it. Paul reflected on his relationship with some false teachers as follows: “Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme,” 1 Timothy 1:20. It is good to divide against such. Do you understand, dear reader, how important it is to side with Luther and not Erasmus, Augustine and not Pelagius, Athanasius and not Arias? Siding with the written bodies of doctrine that expressed one side’s views on a matter afterward will place you on one side of the argument or the other just as quickly as if you were standing behind the actual men at their places of debate.

In the church we are so afraid sometimes to divide over the silly things that we fear all division. Some division is not dire. In other words I may divide with people who are also on their way to heaven with me. I would never be a part of a church that thinks it speaks in tongues. That’s just wrong, however, Christians think they speak in tongues. I divide with them doctrinally, but not as I divide with a Roman Catholic doctrinally. Maybe we fear silly divisions being taken too far rightly, but we still need to know what’s worth dividing over and what’s not then. It’s easy to divide after all. Very easy. We get this, but we forget that sometimes division is the godliest thing we can do. We should understand this. We should pray to never be divided, but be willing when needed. Many denominations did not begin over division at all. We’ll talk more about that soon.

Now some divisions are for good things, and some are for wrong things. I’ve cited examples of both already. Some divisions are not really divisions at all. Denominations *should* be of such. Notice my use of the word “should” here. I want to make the effort here to be really, really clear. There are, for the most part in the American church today, eight reasons that I would divide doctrinally with anyone. My denomination, the Southern Baptist Denomination, is identified by these truths. If it did not uphold these truths as vital I would not be a member of it:

1. That the Holy Bible is perfect in its original text. God wrote it.

2. The physical, literal and historical Resurrection of Jesus Christ.
3. That salvation is by grace through faith alone and not by any works.
4. That God is triune. In the nature of the only one true and living God there are three equal and eternally co-existing immutable Persons. The Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God. The Christian God is without exception one Holy Trinity.
5. Jesus' Virgin Birth.
6. Jesus' perfect sinlessness.
7. That Jesus is the only way to heaven for all because all men are dead, even by the Ten Commandments alone, in personal trespasses and sins.
8. Denying non-Lordship salvation. We must be born again. This will change us progressively and place us willingly at war with all known sin in our lives. (This would encompass all manner of sexual immorality needing to be addressed today).

I would love you and work my hardest against my own flesh to debate such things with you humbly, but I would not back away or down. I would not agree to disagree with you. I would stand upon the Bible in certainty and pronounce you accursed if you disagreed with me on any of the points above. I would accept that responsibility in whatever sphere I found myself. That is what I'm commanded to do and I know full well why. I am not a politician and I am not a professional. Here's my point in this part. These eight truths make or breaks denominations as denominations of Christianity. These are our ground rules. Here's where we discern unity or disunity. Forget smiles; check doctrines! If we're going to divide we should know for what. Here's my what. If a church disagrees with any or all of these points then they are of another religion altogether, and are not Christian by definition. These eight points stand alone and yet they stand together. I didn't make these up. This is the Bible *according to a sound interpretation* and this is also history- the church has contended for these truths as such. These points of doctrine, again just as ground rules, are what I mean when I say, "I just believe the Bible." There is more to it, but this is where I start to navigate the nation-sized wasteland of page upon page of doctrines of both God and devils. There is so much out there. How much can writing out our faith help us therefore!? We should write our statements of faith with total strangers in mind. Each of these eight points has been debated and confessions in the church across denominations have thus addressed them very clearly throughout the centuries. My faith statement affirms these points as essential, but this is only my articulation (and a brief one at that) of them. Many confessions will list a litany of Bible verses behind each point to show a reader the basis for their convictions. A denomination's statement on biblical inspiration found in point one above needn't be verbatim with mine at all, but we can and will reach the same conclusions if we're led by God. *The main point is that the ideas formed here in these eight lines shape God and or the gospel in the mind as they must be shaped or else, at some level, a teaching shows itself to be ultimately inspired by Satan and not by God.* The devil loves the come close approach. These points matter. They may not all have been issues that needed to be dealt with in the apostolic church like circumcision, but they are all issues of varying severity that arose later and demanded

an answer still. Denominations may divide over the specific articulation of such things, but if a church upholds these points then they are Christian in doctrine at their base. If they add to these points something else as essential that may or may not condemn them. There are other essentials not listed here, but they're 1) not common in our land, and 2) are likely discovered in more learned arenas than most of us would encounter regularly. For example, Jesus being a Jew is essential to our gospel. He must be of Abraham's natural seed through David's bloodline or he's not the promised one and we should look for another. Enter Mary. In America you're not going to be contested on this very often. Adding this truth to a faith statement would be great and perhaps seen more in churches with a heavy Jewish population. Then there are some who may affirm all of this and yet add silliness on top of it that distracts or distorts it entirely from view. It'd be like being hired to be a farmer, but never touching the ground. That's dangerous. Word of faith churches often fall into this category. They would affirm all eight of these points, but make other strange doctrines the central focus of their ministries. None of their messages center on upholding truth and the summation of the total of their useless messages on healing, prosperity and gifts of a spirit unknown in Scripture over time reveal a kind of dead religion identifiable even though it's on top a doctrinally sound base. This is not an exclusively American problem, of course, but we are branding it in our country every year more and more. I've seen this personally so I must add it, but still any church who affirmed these points would be de facto Christian...at least in writing.

Has the church divided itself denominationally for foolish reasons? Yes! Absolutely. I've personally never been involved in a frivolous church split, but I've heard the horror stories of churches dividing over the color of the carpets, the version of the Bible used in the pews, or the pastor's lack of tie wear. Divisions like this, while both sides will surely have opposing Bible verse citations to buttress their positions, are not good and most often reflect other built up issues in a body that cause the division.

Denominationalism, from here on out, refers to any church that affirms the eight points listed above and does not add to them in some way that contradicts or obscures them. Any sound Christian entity's theology will consist of both orthodoxy (right belief) and also orthopraxy (right living). This is true of individuals, whole churches, and whole church denominations.

We are all products of our experiences and preferences. God's design with denominations may be summarized by simply affirming that he knows how different we all are. Amen. There's nothing wrong with this. Denominationalism can cater to this in a good way. You may be a more outlandish personality and so loud music in a church (assuming it's not me-ism music) may appeal to you and so you may go to a denomination of church that has it. Sometimes denominations can be identified by such things. That would be just fine. If a church's teaching is sound then anything as such thing can be taken in stride. You may come from a more conservative lifestyle and so a more liturgical approach to honoring God in the church may appeal to you. This too is just fine. Nothing wrong with it. Denominations then could appeal to different types of people. Problems would come if we begin to see others doing it differently as sinful, or if we begin to see "our way" as "the way." You may like a more structures approach to church and so a confessional portion of worship is most welcome. You may come from a more

extemporaneous church background and so you value more of an appearance of originality in your church. Your personal tastes may point you toward a large church. Your personality may point you to a small church. You may not like a church with cameras in it. You may be part of a church that does. Your personal tastes may drive you to a church with a pastor behind a small pedestal or one with the pastor elevated fifteen feet behind a wooden pulpit. A movie character from your youth might “subconsciously” yoke you to a specific teacher’s tone of voice. Whatever. Your tastes may take you to a church that encourages you to keep your young children in the service with you, or maybe your convictions take you to a place with a youth program where you drop the kids off and pick them up after service. Your tastes may take you to a church with a hierarchical approach to church politics, or you may find it more biblical to be in a church that has a majority rule kind of approach to things. You may want to be in a church that allows women to be deacons. You may find that unwise. I think there’s room for dispute here on this one. Your tastes may take you to a church that looks like an old church, or maybe you like the strip mall looking place. In any case such things are the blessing of denominationalism and are ways that a church can sort of morph to its people. As long as the truth is intact then we should simply find a place that “works for us.” We should submit to that place. We should understand what aspects of it are local and not binding on anyone else so that “our way” doesn’t become “the way.” Denominations allow us a freedom that is limitless, but still bound by the word of God.

It’s this last statement that really prompted this letter. “Bound by the word of God.” What does that mean? In short, it doesn’t mean only that. It can’t because we live in a fallen world. Catholics claim this, but they’re not. Mormons profess a faith that they claim does not contradict the Bible, but they’re wrong. Jehovah’s Witnesses, who also have a completely pagan religion, will stand on your doorstep and say they can preach right out of your Bible. The Church of Christ (left wing) will claim that they’re Christian while adding water baptism as a prerequisite for forgiveness. They’re thus the closest to truth yet still in complete error in my judgment. *It’s important to note that our stance regarding doctrine is a judgment of doctrine and not necessarily one of people.* When we examine a church’s doctrine we should remember that its people are still people and need to be respected. We cannot separate a false prophet from false prophecy, but people are still people and doctrines are still doctrines. So, I condemn Roman Catholicism outright *as a religious body of doctrine.* In its totality it is a doctrine of demons. Yes. Even though this is certain I do not consider every Roman Catholic necessarily condemned. There is a difference. We must be specific and treat each person on a case by case basis whenever possible. A person’s position in a church may instantly, as is proper, elevate their guilt in a false doctrine without further qualification. It is certain that the pope in Rome is a false prophet. He is not confused or uneducated as to his religion’s doctrines yet he affirms them. The person you meet at Walmart, however, who professes to be a Catholic may not be as educated and therefore as guilty as others who know that church’s beliefs well. Be careful. Know the truth. Be loving. That should be part of our confessions as well.

We too in our faith must be specific regarding a great many things. Simply stating “I believe the Bible” is the position of perhaps wise people answering foolishly. To say I believe in Jesus Christ is the most theologically driven statement one can make. “Christ” is not his last

name. It is a title that means something only upon serious theological examination. The question, “Which Jesus do you believe in?” is an ever-expanding answer in light of the newly invented false Jesuses in the world. The Mormons have a Jesus, as do all the other false groups I’ve mentioned. One of my confessional statements alone would distinguish me from all these groups (minus Catholicism) in the following way: The London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 speaks of God in section 2.3 saying: “In this divine and infinite Being there are three subsistences, the Father, the Word or Son, and Holy Spirit, of one substance, power, and eternity, each having the whole divine essence, yet the essence undivided: the Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son; all infinite, without beginning, therefore but one God, who is not to be divided in nature and being, but distinguished by several peculiar relative properties and personal relations; which doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our communion with God, and comfortable dependence on him.” Rome would agree with this. In another section, however, I would find a written codification that supports my anathematization of Roman Catholicism and the Church of Christ (left wing) with the following: “Christ, by his obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt of all those that are justified; and did, by the sacrifice of himself in the blood of his cross, undergoing in their stead the penalty due unto them, make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to God's justice in their behalf; yet, inasmuch as he was given by the Father for them, and his obedience and satisfaction accepted in their stead, and both freely, not for anything in them, their justification is only of free grace, that both the exact justice and rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners.” Section 11.3. My faith is hereby stated clearly on matters *that require clear speech*. What a blessing it is. I thank God for the works of the men who wrote this. They were not acting on their own authority. They were speaking in light of the Scripture in their time to preserve the faith. They helped me. My denomination’s confessional history helped me understand the Bible. They were mirrors that were glad to fold up once their work was done.

Also don’t forget that there’s not a single church any of us have ever been to that does not have a “man made” interpretation of the Bible. Unless you go into a church and the pastor ascends the stage, reads a text, says absolutely nothing at all, and sits down each week doing just that, then he is expounding something according to something he believes. No one is without interpretation! No one.

After 2,000 years of Christianity and thousands of years of attack the true church is literally marked by truths like a well-worn path in a field coming down through the ages and hopefully finding its trajectory along the next step of your personal faith’s journey. If this is so you’ve been taught well. It comes to us via doctrine via the Bible. Not the Bible and doctrine. It is the Bible. Our doctrine is a mirror and nothing else. Is it true that a man can never touch a bit of church history, never read a written confession of anything, and be just wise in God because he knows the Bible. Yes. Is it possible for any church to do so? Yes. Possible, but not likely. For the sake of his people, any pastor should encourage a reading and trust in denominationally expressed truths.

No church is as sound without the history of the faith as one that teaches it. It is true that each generation is one generation from apostasy. We should be teaching our kids that the Bible has not just appealed to us in our current time. It is truth from its inscription. Denominations may cater to our personal tastes, but they will all distinguish us from error when they're true to their origins. There is such a value to this! There is a tendency to feel like we need to get everything "straight from God." It's true that we each must personally come into the faith. No one is saved because they're merely a part of a church or denomination. We're only saved when we're born again by a personal interaction with the risen Jesus. This is personal, yes. It is almost always done, however, as designed by God, as part of a community of believers. It has been my own personal experience that the more a denomination leans away from confessionalism, the further it gets toward dangerous "private revelations" in the Bible. We've all met those people who interpret the rock under the bush as a symbol of the anointing of the... Things that have nothing but personal interpretive fancy. Silliness really. Such things literally mark the faith of a great many people today. Secret meanings are everywhere for them on top of every colon of the Bible, and especially atop every semi colon! I am so weary of this. In the Pentecostal Charismatic denomination (using the term "denomination" dangerously) especially it's been my experience that the arrogance engendered by a "I just go to straight to God" mentality is very dangerous. They become utterly impervious to correction because "God told them" everything directly. They may not even realize how this can be dangerous. In a sense, of course, Christians do get *everything* they know about Jesus *directly* from God himself, but there's a difference between knowing that everything you've been taught is from the lips of God and having a theology that teaches you that you are receiving direct and private special revelations from God. What I mean is that so many are taught that God "speaks to you personally." They see themselves only as individuals and not a body. Scripture becomes an almost totally private interpretation. Its pastors are accustomed to what new ideas they got from the Bible last night. Strange symbolism emerges and everyone becomes their own authority. Doctrine is almost never discussed. In fact, any mention of it is often met with condescension and belittlement. After all, they got what they believe "from God" not men. Again, the further a place gets from confessionalism, the more I've see this in churches. We must come and individuals to the cross, nonetheless this should be done in the context of commitment to a church. We all dine at a very large table together. From the beginning the church "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers," Acts 2:42. From the beginning non-apostolic teachers were encouraged to teach authoritatively. Paul taught Timothy (a non-apostle), "Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me," 2 Timothy 1:13. He was taught to, "Preach the word! Be ready in season *and* out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching," 2 Timothy 4:2, and also to "commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also," 2 Timothy 2:2. Enter the church body to which was given the authority that, "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven," Matthew 18:18. When does this end? It doesn't. We are a part of this today with the same authority. We must take it seriously. *Denominationalism is not the problem. It's a lack of understanding of what unites us throughout all the denominations that is.* It is a lack of knowledge of the truth that divides us. We are united by the Spirit himself first. Him in us is what should lead us to strive to affirm the truth outside of us. Don't be afraid of denominations.

Be afraid of being accepted by none of them because you, “just get your revelation straight from God.” No man is an island.

Here’s a hypothetical: What if James and Paul had churches on the same street that had a different approach to administering the Lord’s Supper? What if Paul liked the elders to hand it out to the people, and James liked to have each person get up from where they were and file past other lay people in the assembly and have a portion handed to them? And what if certain people liked it each way? What if that led a person to go to James’ church over Paul’s? Any problem? I hope not. What if people in Paul’s church (or even Paul himself) were to cite certain Old Testament verses in support of why the leaders in the church alone *should* hand out the elements, and some in James’ church were to site other verses, and the same verses, to support why the laity should also be allowed to hand it out because it better involved the whole assembly in the celebration? Any problems now? I hope not. What if some in James’ church called Paul’s wicked and anathematized it for its feast practices? Now I hope you’d have a problem. Both churches can and should approach the subject convinced of their position. They *should* be convinced and find verses to support why they do what they do unto the Lord. How they deal with each other will make the difference as to whether it’s all done in a godly manner or not. This may be an example of denominationalism. Each church would attract its own and that’s okay. If both churches could only understand (and of course I’d certainly agree that the Apostles would) that the Lord was not prescriptive on the matter, nor did the Spirit lead the Apostles under inspiration to be prescriptive on the subject, then they could both affirm that they’re doing life together in accordance with the word and their own conscience. There would be unity possible between the churches then, perhaps not in exact articulation, but in something else equally worth celebrating, and equally awesome- liberty! We have liberty in Christ to be different and yet of the exact same Spirit! Knowing and even celebrating this would make both church 100% correct while having different opinions on the subject. Any person on either side should be, “...fully convinced in his own mind,” Romans 14:5b. This is glorious for us to know. Oh, how we should teach this to our people in the midst of hundreds of denominations. We are different. Truth be told we can’t even always be certain exactly how we come to certain conclusions in our faith. There is a word called *adiaphora*. This word literally means “things indifferent” or “things in between.” We can have different expressions of something like my hypothetical here. We’re not talking about the Deity of Jesus or something that essentially shapes God or gospel. Yes, everything’s connected in theology like a skeleton, but not every bone is a skull. There is great liberty in the Spirit. Let’s be different, but know why we’re the same.

History, like any written confession, does not Lord itself over our interpretations, but it should guide it. If you read the Bible and come up with something that no one in the history of the church has ever seen, or find yourself teaching doctrines once condemned in the past, you’d better check yourself, you’re probably wrong. Even non-denominational churches are denominations. That’s okay. My invitation to you is to seek out a written confession and put some time into it. I’ve listed a few here and even given you a link to where you can find some. The bottom line I suppose is that there’s safety in a multitude of counselors, Proverbs 11:14. If you have a pastor who’s been teaching for 50 years then you’ve got 50 years of God’s molding and teaching being poured into you. If you add to that another teacher also with 50 years of study

then you've got 100 years of wisdom. Well, if one church generation learns from its previous generations, that learned from its previous generations (and by the way we're talking about some serious minds of times past who maybe weren't quite so distracted as we are today who thought on these things) then you've literally almost got the full weight of the wisdom of the church affecting your study. That's pretty awesome. God is the teacher of his church. He has always been. Don't fear what others have said. Seek it out.

I leave you with an excerpt from the inimitable C.H. Spurgeon (a Reformed Baptist) on the matter:

It is our duty to make a clear and distinct declaration of our principles, that our members may know to what intent they have come together, and that the world also may know what we mean. Far be it from us to join with the Broad Church cry, and furl the banners upon which our distinctive colors are displaced.

We hear on all sides great outcries against creeds. Are these clamors justifiable? It seems to me that when properly analyzed most of the protests are not against creeds, but against truth, for every man who believes anything must have a creed, whether he write it down and print it or no; or if there be a man who believes nothing, or anything, or everything by turns, he is not a fit man to be set up as a model.

Attacks are often made against creeds because they are a short, handy form by which the Christian mind gives expression to its belief, and those who hate creeds do so because they find them to be weapons as inconvenient, as bayonets in the hands of British soldiers have been to our enemies. They are weapons so destructive to theology that it protests against them. For this reason let us be slow to part with them. Let us lay hold of God's truth with iron grip, and never let it go.

After all, there is a Protestantism still worth contending for; there is a Calvinism still worth proclaiming, and a gospel worth dying for. There is a Christianity distinctive and distinguished from Ritualism, Rationalism, and Legalism, and let us make it known that we believe in it.

Up with your banners, soldiers of the cross! This is not the time to be frightened by the cries against conscientious convictions, which are nowadays nicknamed sectarianism and bigotry. Believe in your hearts what you profess to believe; proclaim openly and zealously what you know to be the truth. Be not ashamed to say such-and-such things are true, and let men draw the inference that the opposite is false.

Whatever the doctrines of the gospel may be to the rest of mankind, let them be your glory and boast. Display your banners, and let those banners be such as the church of old carried. Unfurl the old primitive standard, the all-victorious standard of the cross of Christ. In very deed and truth--in hoc signo vinces—the atonement is the conquering truth. Let others believe as they may, or deny as they will, for you the truth as it is in Jesus is the one thing that has won your heart and made you a soldier of the cross. (-Spurgeon. *The Church as She Should Be*).

Thank you for your attention to this letter.