To the puzzlement (real or pretended) of some of our dialogue partners of other ecclesiastical traditions, the Reformed family has spawned not one but many confessions of faith. More than sixty such documents were devised during the sixteenth century, and the high degree of mutual consistency between them is a tribute to those theologians who energetically commuted between the Reformed centers of Europe and corresponded with one another in Latin, the language common to scholars of the time. The Reformed are not alone in having produced numerous confessions of faith: the Baptists, for example, were not dilatory in this matter. It is more than likely, however, that more such documents have emerged from Reformed circles during the past century than from any other quarter.

Confessions of faith embody doctrinal propositions that their authors hold to be true. At their best they achieve clarity, and there is much to be said for this. They are, moreover, corporate affirmations; they announce the things ‘commonly believed among us.’ Again, they are, in the language of J.L. Austin, performative statements, for confessing is something that we do. Thus sentences beginning, “I/We believe …” are in the same category as sentences beginning, “I/We promise …” Confessions of faith also serve as doctrinal boundary-markers both explicitly, as when they counter the claims of Rome, for example, and implicitly, as when they do not affirm universalism or Arminianism. We might say that, like the Chalcedonian Formula of 451 with its four famous adverbs denying Arianism, docetism, and the like, confessions of faith erect doctrinal road blocks against untoward doctrines. As P.T. Forsyth observed, “There must surely be in every positive religion

---

2 Some of these are to be found in Lukas Vischer, ed., Reformed Witness Today. A Collection of Confessions and Statements of Faith Issued by Reformed Churches (Bern: Evangelische Arbeitsstelle Oekumene Schweiz, 1982).
some point where it may so change as to lose its identity and become another religion.” At the same time, Forsyth elsewhere reminds us that “Revelation did not come in a statement, but in a person;” but he immediately adds, “Faith … must be capable of statement, else it could not be spread; for it is not an ineffable, incommunicable mysticism.” In all of this we see both of the importance of doctrinal affirmation and are cautioned against elevating our confessional statements that are, at most, subordinate standards, above the One to whom they bear witness. If we forget that confessions of faith are subordinate, we are on the way to idolatry; if we forget that they are standards, heresy may beckon.

Before proceeding further, I wish to state something which is so obvious that only the most hard-line and blinkered of confessional purists would overlook it: formal confessions of faith are not the only means by which the Reformed have made, and continue to make, corporate confessional affirmations. For example, I have argued that the English Congregational branch of the Reformed family probably developed more ways of corporately confessing the faith than any other strand of our tradition. In addition to their Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order (1658) and subsequent documents, they sang their faith in the words of their pioneer hymns writers—Isaac Watts, Philip Doddridge, and others; they identified with the corporate confession when ‘giving in’ their experience at their local church meeting prior to their reception as communicant members; they heard rehearsals of the orthodox faith in the personal confessions their ministers were required to produce at ordination and induction services; and they signed the locally devised covenant.

---

3 P.T. Forsyth (hereinafter referred to as PTF), *The Principle of Authority in Relation to Certainty, Sanctity and Society*, (1913), (London: Independent Press, 1952), 219. Forsyth (1848–1921) served five pastorates over a period of twenty-five years, and was Principal of Hackney [Congregational] College from 1901 until his death. Strongly emphasizing the centrality of the Cross, he was, in my opinion, the most stimulating British theologian of the twentieth century. See further, Alan P.F. Sell, *Testimony and Tradition: Studies in Reformed and Dissenting Thought* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), chs 7 and 8; idem, *Nonconformist Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006).

