

# FORMS OF UNITY: ARE CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS UN-BIBLICAL AND DIVISIVE?

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## ABSTRACT:

Creeds and confessions have been a long standing expression of biblical faith and a tool of the Church to maintain doctrinal purity. They not only appear early in the post apostolic church, but they are found numerous within the pages of the Bible and have always served as a staple of our Judeo-Christian faith traditions. Unfortunately, these useful tools have fallen on hard times, especially within the modern evangelical church. Many treat them as impositions and restrictive, simply because they do not understand them. In this short article, pastor Todd Murphy explores the question of creeds and confessions both doctrinally and practically demonstrating how they are not only biblical and useful, but provide an excellent counterbalance against theological error.

## INTRODUCTION:

Tolerance has become the post-modern mind's answer to what was once called a orthodoxy. This statement could be made no more clearly than by the new bumper sticker I see three times a week here in the North East with reads "Tolerance" but the word is spelled out through the religious icons of all the major world religions. For instance the cross is the "T", the "A" a Star of David, and the "C" the Islamic moon.

The new orthodoxy is that unity and peace will be found, not in a humble and joint venture for "the truth" but rather by the democratizing of truth. As a culture we have dropped the definite article and have just opted for "truth" as a formless concept, or even "truths" as a multiplicity of perspectives that reside with equal authority within the individual.

This relativization of truth in the minds of our generation has deep theological import for both the culture at large, and for the Church in particular. The one thing that historic Christianity has often stood on, in the face of this onslaught, was her very biblical confessional tradition. Unfortunately however, in the face of cultural relativism and evangelical pragmatism, the confessions themselves have fallen on hard times. In fact there is now a pervasive sentiment that confessions are not only unnecessary but unbiblical. In this article we will explore how creeds and confessions are actually at the heart of biblical faith and have been employed from the earliest times. Further, we will demonstrate that while they can be abused like anything else that is good, the Church is at a serious disadvantage when it abandons them.

## 1. THE LOSS OF CONFESSIONS

The loss of "truth" is not unique to the secular powers and culture at large. Sadly to say it has made major inroads into the fabric of the Church, especially those of more evangelical persuasions. While some circles still celebrate classical apologetics and the rifle of books by Lee Strobel, this disintegration of truth has manifest itself most clearly in the almost wholesale abandonment of creedal and confessional statements.

Part of this came through the anti-academic tendencies of the Second Great Awakening which was reactive to any form of orthodoxy. This perspective is still very much alive in Charismatic, Pentecostal and many revivalist traditions today. For these, the embrace of a confession is the "word of man" and so it is naively assumed that if we just "stick to the bible" we will be more biblical. Unfortunately what this type of reasoning has always failed to honestly consider is that there is no interpretation that is unmediated. Those who reject confessional documents, do so under the naïve rubric of "not interpreting" the bible. "They inadvertently miss that any statement about what the bible says, is in fact an interpretation of it. Another way to say this is that unless you are going to stick to purely reading Scripture and never discussing what it actually "means," one is then forced to interpret it. That is actually being generous on my part. Modern linguistic theory instructs us that any spoken or written "speech act" requires a corresponding act of interpretation to be intelligible. All speech communication needs both an addressor and an addressee to be

meaningful otherwise there is no “communing.”. Therefore the act of listening and interpreting the data is as critical to communality as the act of speaking.

This kind of interpretive foolishness that denies these fundamental precepts of human communication was comically demonstrated to me a number of years back in a conversation with a Jehovah’s witness. They also being one of the proud incarnations of the Second Great Awakening, have an inherent doctrine of anti-confessionalism. It was so entertaining to have this gentleman hand me a piece of their literature while proudly pontificating on how they do not “believe” in “confessions”, but only in the bible. Then I turned to the inside page and what do I see, a “statement of faith” listing 8-10 items that the Jehovah’s Witness “believe.” You can only imagine how hard I laughed as I pointed this inconsistency out. And it also is worth mentioning that even the statement “we do not believe in man-made creeds” is inherently credal. Any observation by a human that is formulated into a statement has an element of belief to it. A witness in a court proceedings is often called upon to confess publicly what she or he believe was observed.

## 2. BIBLICAL ROOTS

Probably the most perennial problem among low-church and some evangelical traditions in regard to confessions is the belief that they are not “biblical.” This thinking stems from a couple of sources. The first cause of this is often a shallow or inarticulate reading of the Scriptures. They are there, but most just don’t recognize them when they read them. The second source of this and linked to the first, is often Jesus’ sayings about the doctrines and teachings of men (Matt 15:7-9 & Mark 7:6-13). In this case, Jesus rebukes the Scribes and Pharisees quoting from Isaiah pointing out how they elevate the doctrines and commandments of men above the clear statements of Scriptures. We may also add to this Jesus’ diatribe against the same in Matthew 23. But any way you look at it, Jesus was not rebuking them for all tradition, but for taking traditions that were originally meant to help practice faith in second Temple Judaism and contradicting clear teachings of Scripture. However these pharisaic precepts were not even statements of belief as much as they were commandments and purity rites to clarify and expound OT legal precepts. This body of Rabbinic laws is still extant today in what is known as the Mishnah and Talmud. But the idea that traditions are evil in and of themselves is not biblical. All human beings have tradition, and even the Apostle Paul told both the Colossians and Timothy to “keep” and “hold fast” to the traditions he had given them. The question is always then how well does a tradition and teaching actually accord with Scripture. If we are truly biblical, Scripture will always be our final authority for answering doctrinal matters and every generation has the responsibility to take what they have been taught and retest them with scripture.

As we delve back into the Scriptures we see in fact that confessional statements are quite common. One of the earliest we find in Deuteronomy 26.

<sup>NAS</sup> **Deuteronomy 26:1-10** "Then it shall be, when you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance, and you possess it and live in it, <sup>2</sup> that you shall take some of the first of all the produce of the ground which you shall bring in from your land that the LORD your God gives you, and you shall put *it* in a basket and go to the place where the LORD your God chooses to establish His name. <sup>3</sup> "And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, *'I declare this day to the LORD my God that I have entered the land which the LORD swore to our fathers to give us.'* <sup>4</sup> "Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the LORD your God. <sup>5</sup> "And you shall answer and say before the LORD your God, *'My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; but there he became a great, mighty and populous nation. <sup>6</sup> 'And the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, and imposed hard labor on us. <sup>7</sup> 'Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction and our toil and our oppression; <sup>8</sup> and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with great terror and with signs and wonders; <sup>9</sup> and He has brought us to this place, and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>10</sup> 'And now behold, I have brought the first of the produce of the ground which Thou, O LORD hast given me.'*

This confession in Deuteronomy was meant to be practiced by Israel after possession of the promise land. It was used when bringing in the tithe of the land. This means that the confessional statement was to be recited as an act of worship! Note vs 10b – 11: *"And you shall set it down before the LORD your God, and worship before the LORD your God; and you and the Levite and the alien who is among you shall rejoice in*

*all the good which the LORD your God has given you and your household.”* The central point of the confessional statement is the history of God’s redemptive acts. In reciting the confession, the worshipper recounted the history of God’s work with his people, with specific attention to God’s faithfulness. This brings us to our next point.

### 3. HISTORY OF REDEMPTION AND THE MIGHTY ACTS OF GOD

The confessional nature of our faith is unavoidable for no other reason than that we have an historical faith. Unlike eastern mysticism and spirituality which look for truth within the individual through contemplation, biblical faith is based on truth that is outside of us. Regardless of whether a person chooses to believe it or not, the Apostle John’s confession in the opening words of his first epistle ring true:

<sup>NAS</sup> **1 John 1:1-2** What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of life;

The historic Christian message is one that took place in real time and space. Jesus is not a disembodied phantom as the Gnostic heresy proposed, but he became flesh blood. We received that message through divine special revelation in real time. So we do not merely look back to biblical ideas, but more importantly, biblical events. Probably no text makes this more clear than in I Corinthians 15:12-22 where Paul says rhetorically that if Christ was not resurrected, then our faith is worthless, our preaching is in vain, and we are of all men to be most pitied. Paul looks at the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ as an historical fact, and one worth dying for.

But this orientation does not begin with the New Testament. It is woven deeply into every page of Bible. In the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century George Mendenhall pointed out the similarity of parts of Exodus and Deuteronomy to ancient Near Eastern vassal treaties. While we will not go into those details here, one important element was what scholars call the “historical prologue.” This was an essential part of the treaty document and the ceremony of covenant making that it represented. The historical prologue in many ways does the very same thing as the confession of Deuteronomy 26 we listed above, namely it recounts the history of the relationship between the two parties, with special emphasis upon the benefactor’s kindness toward the beneficiary. In the Biblical texts that bear this impression, they recount the history of God’s dealing with his covenant people, Israel.

Probably the best example of this is Deuteronomy chapters 1:6-4:40. The next part of the covenant literary form that usually followed the historical prologue, was called the “stipulations” or “commandments” which were given to the vassal to direct their behavior toward the sovereign. This is precisely what is going on in Deuteronomy; in chapters 1-4, a detailed historical account of the relationship between God and Israel is reviewed immediately followed by Deuteronomy chapter 5, the Ten Commandments. This is a decidedly redemptive historical orientation between Israel and Yahweh.

This historical orientation is equally a part of the theology of the New Testament and figures into several confessions embedded within it. While the list of which texts are properly hymns and which are confessions remains to discussion, the reality is that either way, they emanate from the earliest church’s worship and confessional heritage. Chief among them is

**1 Timothy 3:16** <sup>16</sup> And by common *confession* great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, Was vindicated in the Spirit, Beheld by angels, Proclaimed among the nations, Believed on in the world, Taken up in glory.

One of the oldest Christian confessions that New Testament scholars have identified is Philippians 2:6-11:

**Philippians 2:5b-11** Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. <sup>9</sup> Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, <sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In both these texts we can clearly see not only the historical element of identifying Christ, but also the

declarative nature of the statements. In this way, confessions and creeds provide a structured pronouncement of who God is and are a discrete form of declarative worship. They are a way for God's people to proclaim his glory.

What is most important here is that the biblical faith is an historical one. God is outside of us, and to use theological parlance, he is transcendent. However in his self-giving love, he enters into time and space to not only speak, but to act on behalf of his people. So the opening words of the book of Hebrews resonate with us as Christians: "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in *His* Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world." Here we see how word and act come together historically and personally in the person of Jesus Christ. The very problem that we as evangelicals take most issue with theological liberalism is their misguided notion that the message of the Bible can still be "true" even if the events did not happen. This makes the emphasis on "eyewitnesses" in the New Testament a mockery. It is this historical orientation of biblical faith that makes Christianity not only unique and true, but also confessional.

#### 4. THE HONESTY OF CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS

People stray from scripture, not because of creeds, but because they are sinners. In fact, I remember being a new Christian where it was pretty much me and my bible and going round and round with all kinds of new "insights" only several years in to it realizing that some of these so called "insights" were absolutely contradictory to others. I realized that I was going around in spiritual circles. There is no way to completely avoid this as we grow in the faith, but confessions are meant to center us on the core doctrines of Scriptures in order to give us a proper orientation toward the Bible and God.

We would all like to think, as many who reject confessions do, that we are just being "biblical." What is behind this thinking is actually the naive assumption that we can read and apply scripture without the process of interpretation. However every statement made about scripture is in fact an interpretation. There is no statement made by our mouths that is not first mediated through our minds. In fact this is true of all speech acts whether they be heard by the ears or read off of a page. So the rejection of the act of interpretation and confessions is not merely theologically misguided, but linguistically far fetched. It denies the very conventions of human communication that God planted in us.

Any time we say "I believe \_\_\_\_\_", we are not only making an interpretation, but also a confessional statement about what we think on an issue, whether that be a theological statement or that the Red Sox are the best baseball team on earth. Think for a moment about Paul's statement in Romans 10:9 "that if you confess with your mouth Jesus *as* Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved." To confess Jesus as Lord implies belief. Even Paul is recognizing this convention of human communication. But look also at the ideas within it: (1) Jesus is "Lord" which indicates that he is not only a King, but God too; (2) That he was raised from the dead, which necessarily implies that he was fully human, lived a real life, died and God raised him from the dead. This confessional statement is jam-packed with very specific "beliefs" about the historical truths that are the foundation of the Gospel.

The act of using creeds and confessions then is not only biblical as we see here in Paul, but it is the honest and right thing to do. When we piously deny the need of creeds and confessions we are really being arrogant by implying that my personal reading of Scripture is inherently the right one. But by embracing creeds and confessions, we are humbling ourselves to say, hey I do not know everything about the bible, but I want to worship and understand Christ with his Church. Therefore as a minister in the Christian Reformed Church, when someone comes to me and says "hey what does your tradition believe," what they mean is "what does your tradition believe the Bible says?" I can then very easily point them to our confessional documents such as the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort. Now the individual has a place to go that will objectively answer his or her questions. He or she does not have to agree with me, but they can quickly read through them and know where I stand.

On the other hand, if I was asked the same question, and (like the silly Jehovah's witness I mentioned above), I smugly answered "I just believe the Bible," I have done nothing to help that individual understand my beliefs at all have I? Nor have I moved them any closer to understanding the Gospel. If they are the least bit perceptive, they will say "anybody can say that." The bottom line though is this; I haven't told him anything about what I really believe that is helpful. I have possibly implied that I might be an arrogant know-it-all. This is more important now than ever before in the current denominational wasteland, all of which claim the bible as their sole authority to one degree or another. The Bible is our canon and authority by which confessional statements are tested, but the creeds and confessions provide a succinct summary of how we understand the bible which is not only communicatively honest, but also pedagogically

advantageous, especially for discipleship.

## 6. CONFESSIONS AND THE DISCIPLING PROCESS

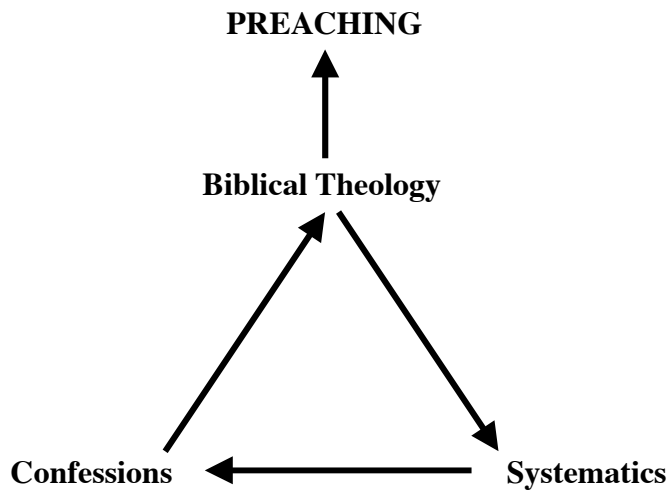
The question now is what practical value do the confessional statements of Historic Christian belief have for us? Well there are a few. First is just helping keep us centered on the doctrines that matter most. Second, and probably most important is how they can be used as tools to help us know God better. This pursuit defined by itself as “faith seeking understanding” is the discipline we call theology.

Unfortunately I often I hear Christians speak of “theology” in negative terms because they do not understand it. So often it is treated as an academic discipline that is removed from a relationship with a holy God and his people. Unfortunately there is some truth to every stereotype, but the reality of the matter is not that theology is inherently bad, but rather that there are good and bad theologies. Even an atheist has a theology. When an atheist says “I don’t believe in God” what he is really saying is “I do not believe that there is a god.” What is ironic about that statement is its confessional character, “I believe \_\_\_\_\_.” On the one hand he is contradicting biblical truth, but on the other, his very action is contradicting the content of his statement, because the act of stating a belief in a confessional way is inherently Christian! A true postmodern relativist, if he is being consistent, would deny the ability to know or believe anything. What he is saying is that how he is living life today does not matter because when he dies, he is “trusting” that he will not face a holy God to whom he will answer for his life.

We must recognize however that every theology needs to be tested against Scripture in order to verify whether it is biblical or not. Again, confessions provide a quick way to do this. A confession is a statement about our beliefs so someone can readily compare it with Scripture and every generation has the responsibility to test the theology and confessions passed down by the previous generations in an act of fidelity. But this would be much harder to do without confessions to start with.

Confessions provide a quick way into grasping the big picture of the Bible. What would take years of trial and error, the humility of embracing creeds and confessions allows us to, in one sense, jump near the front of the line or stand on the shoulders of the theological greats who hammered out those creeds long before us. It keeps us from trying to reinvent the wheel. It has been amusing to me to watch the growth of so called “messianic Judaism” over the last couple of decades. I have found it concerning how many leaders of this movement I have witnessed begin writing off major doctrines like the deity of Christ and the Trinity as “gentile” with no regard for the historic creeds only to come around years later to see the inevitability of these core doctrines. In fact I recently had dinner with a good friend and prominent leader among the UMJC as he lamented the bizarre errors others in his organizations were wandering into now. He like they, originally wanted to explore the Jewishness of Christianity, but now it had become a wrecking ball to New Testament witness. They could have saved themselves years of confusion by humbling themselves and studying the Scriptures with a the creeds and confessions in hand.

A number of years back I put together what I called the “Theological Triangle or the “Theological Cycle.” It looks like this. Biblical/exegetical theology at the top, systematic theology in the right corner, and confessions in the left corner. Each is connected with an arrow pointing clockwise to demonstrate a constant dialogical flow. In other words, Biblical theology informs systematic theology, systematics informs confessional theology, and confessions again inform biblical theology. However, there is a reason that Biblical theology is at the top. Biblical exegesis and theology is the chief among theological disciplines. It is the disciplined and contextual study of passages of Holy Scripture that is the heartbeat of our quest to know God. However to do it well takes years of disciplined study, not only of the Scriptures but biblical history, and biblical languages. In other words, to do it competently and responsibly takes years of preparation.



Systematics on the other hand combines that information and assimilates it into broader Christian belief. Another way to say this, is that while Biblical Theology may look at the concept of sin in the book of Deuteronomy, the Book of Jeremiah or the Book of Exodus, Systematics looks at that topic across all books to arrive at a more global understanding of sin. Biblical theology is contextually, textually and historically bound. Whereas systematics is a cross-section that cuts a sampling across the entire cake of Scripture.

Credo and Confessions therefore are more or less a distillation of systematics. It takes the conclusions of systematic theology, searches for the most important points and then boils them down to clear most critically resonating statements about Christian belief. It is not an exploratory discipline like Biblical theology or an assimilating discipline like systematics but rather a simplifying, distilling and pedagogical discipline that makes the major points of our faith crystal clear. We might call it the crystalizing discipline. Where this helps the average Christian, is that it makes these major doctrines clear to everyone, theologians, pastors and the average Christian. It gives us a level playing field for all Christians to play on regardless of where we are at in our knowledge of God and Scripture. In fact much of the success of the Protestant Reformation was due to catechisms and confessions that were small and inexpensive print compared to entire bibles and could therefore be reproduced and disseminated more easily.

Interestingly enough when I show the triangle to most people and ask them “where should our personal theological process start?” the respondent almost always points to Biblical Theology. At that point, I would say, yes if you are Saint Paul who was raised at the feet of Gamaliel, that is fine, but for most of us, the starting place is the creeds of our one holy catholic and orthodox faith such as the Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds. After these we may move to the fine Reformation confessions. This is because the confessions give us a paradigm to enter into dialogue with scripture and the Church. Sure we may not always agree with every part of every confessional document. I take issue with minor parts of the Westminster standards, but my study of the Scripture is nonetheless enhanced by having to be in dialogue with these confessional documents. They become a type of sounding board for us to reflect on scripture more thoughtfully. In this way we do not read the scriptures in a vacuum and also benefit from the exercises of humbling ourselves and letting the great Christian minds who preceded us speak into our knowledge and experience of God.

## 7. “FORMS OF UNITY” HOW ORTHODOX CONFESION DRAWS US TOGETHER

The ultimate goal of creeds and confessions is no less than unity. In my Continental Reformed Tradition, we refer to our three confessional documents, as our “Forms of Unity.” This is because it is this common confessional understanding of what the bible teaches about Christ that brings us together. We do not place our faith in nebulous ideas or in man’s wisdom, but in the person and work of Christ. It is this work of his incarnation, death, burial, and resurrection that has secured for us an eternal hope and granted us the Spirit through which we proclaim together as a church, the most intimate of confessions, “Abba, Father!”

In Matthew 16:13-18 Jesus came preaching in the region of Caesarea Philippi and asked his disciples “who do people say that the Son of Man is?” To this they variously replied: “Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.” But then Jesus asked them more pointedly: “But who do you say that I am?” At this point Peter finally spoke up and replied an equally pointed confession of who Jesus is: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” What Jesus says following this

confession by Peter is important.

<sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven. <sup>18</sup> "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it.

The first observation is Jesus' statement that "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you." Jesus' statement implies the obverse, that the Father, through the Spirit has revealed it to him. Another way to say it, is that this true confession that Jesus is the Christ is a confession that can only come through the Spirit's work in a person's life. Second, Jesus then calls Peter "pebble" and that upon this "bedrock" He will build his Church. What is this "bedrock" to which Jesus refers? It is Peter's confession that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God." This statement is the centerpiece of all creation and redemption. This is what the fall and the plan of redemption all unanimously move toward, the glorification of God the Father through the revelation of the Son. The Church is called to be a spiritual community unified around this common confession regarding the person and work of Jesus. This was not to imply that we would not have different understandings and even theological debates, but that through the common quest to know and love the risen Christ, Jesus would build his Church and bring her together. So ironically enough, creeds and confessions do not constrict us, they merely guide us. They actually point out what Christians must be unified on, but at the same time, they actually inherently imply theological latitude in what is omitted. In other words, what confessions do not include leave room for not only creative theological reflection, but also disagreement among equally committed Christians that being various perspectives to the table.

In closing I will leave you with a great story. When I began planting Sacred Journey Church, I began doing some leadership training with the Heidelberg Catechism. Also at that time God gave me an particularly self-confident music leader who did not like this and dug his heels in the sand and refused to attend. Eventually he and some others got their nose out of joint over this alleged "impracticality" and decided to depart without a word. A couple weeks later, one of our regular attenders, a youth pastor who was attending, did not show one night because a relative had lost their child to a miscarriage. The youth pastor, so moved by her distraught state, did something audacious; he gave her his study copy of the Heidelberg Catechism. Much to his delight she told him some time after that she read it and the doctrine taught within it was what got her through it. It of course could not bring her child back, but it did do what good biblical teaching is intended to do; put God back on the throne of our mind and let us live again within the reality of a sovereign and compassionate God who understands our toil and suffering. So while I lost a few unteachable people who were sure that the Heidelberg study was a waste of time, it in fact proved to be the opposite, a warm reminder of the God who loves and saves sinners in the midst of this world's suffering. Therefore it behooves us to understand the central import of confessions, both personally and corporately, and how distinctly Christian it is. In the same way we must also understand its limitations so that we can use them properly as tools of catechesis and instruction to drive us back into dialogue with the Holy Scriptures in a way that is both honest with ourselves and our brothers in Christ.

1. Some scholars in schools of higher criticism argue chapters 1-3 instead and therefore argue that Duet. 4 was a prologue to the Deuteronomistic history (Joshua – Kings) and was later adapted to the chapters 1-3. For our purposes though, regardless of such conjectures, chapter 4, like chapters 1-3 serves to recount the history of the relationship between God and Israel. Dennis . McCarthy, Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and the Old Testament, (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), 188-94.

2. Raymond Brown, "An Introduction to the New Testament" (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 489-93.