

# TRUTH AT ALL COSTS: CREEDS OF THE REFORMATION THE SCOTS CONFESSION

SHERARD EDINGTON

Matthew 21:23-32

In the year 1560, the church in Scotland had problems. The church was not so much a religious institution as it was a political entity. And by church, I mean the only church at the time—the Christian church headquartered in Rome. The situation in Scotland was not unique to that country. It was pretty much the same across Europe. The idea of a separation between church and state had not been instituted and in many places the church was more powerful than the government; in many places it was the government. The church possessed land, wealth, and power. In Scotland, the church had long ago sold out to power. Positions in the church were often filled by the nobility who purchased their ecclesiastical titles. Do you want to be a bishop? All you need is cash. Farther down the ladder were the priests, many of whom were illiterate and had long abandoned preaching. The clergy were frequently guilty of adultery. David Beaton, archbishop of St. Andrews and a Scottish cardinal, had eight illegitimate children. For the people in the pews, confidence in the church, as well as participation, was at a low point. For this reason, the itch for reform was slowing advancing across the country. This demand was fueled, in part, by the writings of the German priest Martin Luther.

Our sermon today is the first of a five-part series that I have titled “Truth at all Costs: The Creeds of the Reformation.” For the next five weeks, we are going to visit five historical creeds and confessions of the Presbyterian Church. The occasion for this series is that October 31st of this year—one month from today—marks the 500th anniversary of that day in 1517 that Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses in Wittenberg, Germany.

The 95 Theses, or as Luther titled them, “Disputation on the Power of Indulgences,” were not a call to form a new church. That was not Luther’s intent. As a priest, he strongly felt there were issues the church needed to address. Specifically, in this instance, it was the church’s selling of indulgences to raise money. Luther did not initiate the Protestant Reformation. People had been calling for reform for over a hundred years. Earlier reformers had been people such as John Wycliffe and John Hus. Both were convicted of heresy. Hus was burned at the stake. Wycliffe, however, was already dead when he was excommunicated, but still, his remains were disinterred and burned anyway.

A century later, Martin Luther became a leading voice for reform thanks to a recent invention—the movable-type printing press. With this new technology, Luther’s writings blanketed Europe in the space of a few months in a way that had been impossible a few years earlier.

In Scotland, at this time, as in most of Europe, the church was politics and politics was the church. There was an ongoing power struggle between the Scots and the English and the French and the Spanish. The major players included James V, Philip II, Elizabeth I, Mary Stuart (who was crowned Queen of Scotland when she was six days old), Mary of Guise, and others. I am not going to delve into all of the political intrigue, but it is important to remember that the forces favoring reform as well as those opposing reform had their own political agendas.

One of the early Scottish voices of reform was Patrick Hamilton. He was one of those people inspired by Luther's writings. In 1528, eleven years after Luther posted his Theses, Hamilton was summoned to St. Andrews on the pretence of debating Archbishop Cardinal David Beaton. In reality, Beaton had convened a kangaroo court of his influential friends. When Hamilton arrived he was charged with heresy, convicted, and publicly burned at dawn the next day. However, instead of suppressing reform this act fanned the flames. One witness to this event was a teacher in St. Andrews named George Wishart. In response to Hamilton's death, Wishart traveled to Geneva to study with John Calvin. In 1543, he returned to Scotland and began preaching Calvin's Reform doctrine. In response, Cardinal Beaton sent his men to capture this rebel. Wishart fled from town to town, staying one step ahead of his pursuers, yet took the time to preach at every stop. In Haddington, he met a young priest named John Knox. Knox asked to accompany Wishart but Wishart forbid it because of the danger. Within hours, Wishart was captured by an army of five-hundred of Beaton's men. He was taken to St. Andrews and burned at the stake. A few months later, to avenge the deaths of Hamilton and Wishart, a small band of Protestants broke into the castle at St. Andrews and skewered Cardinal Beaton with their swords.

John Knox was born in 1514. He studied theology at St. Andrews and was ordained as a priest in 1536. For seven years he served as a priest and also as a tutor to two boys. After Wishart's death, Knox joined the Protestant rebels at St. Andrew's as their chaplain. He wasn't there long before the French captured St. Andrews castle. Knox was seized and taken to be a galley-slave in the French fleet. He was held for 19 months until the English government secured his release. He served a church in England for a while before heading to Geneva to study under Calvin. He returned to Scotland and continued his rebel crusade. He made another trip to Geneva and returned to Scotland in 1559. In 1560, with the French finally out of Scotland and Mary of Guise having died in her sleep, the Scottish Parliament urged Knox to develop a confession of faith to unite the country politically and ecclesiastically. Knox, along with five associates (oddly, all of them named John) created this document in just four days. It was adopted by the Parliament. It is the first reformed confession in the English language.

This confession, known as the Scots Confession, begins with this preface: "Long have we thirsted, dear brethren, to have made known to the world the doctrine which we profess and for which we have suffered abuse and danger." The structure of the confession parallels that of the Apostles Creed. It has twenty-five chapters

developed around the themes of Father, Son, Spirit, Church, and Consummation. The purpose of the confession was to be a unifying statement of faith for the nation. As Americans, this is an odd concept for us. The closest we might come would be our Declaration of Independence. As a document it states who we are, what we believe, and why we are breaking from the old system. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

One of the central themes of Knox’ Confession has to do with election, or predestination. He focuses on forgiveness and salvation. For Catholics, if one wanted to attain God’s forgiveness, then one needed to attend Mass. Faith alone was not enough. Catholics believed that the sacrifice of Christ on the cross was present in the Mass and accessible to those participating. If you aren’t physically present, you lose salvation.

Knox and other reformers viewed salvation differently. For them, salvation required only faith. It is not the church, or the saints, or our actions, but God’s great mercy that saves us. God elected (or chose) God’s people for salvation. We don’t earn God’s grace, it is a gift.

In Reformed language, election is a way of saying “grace alone.” It is not about our actions but about God’s love. Some would say that election removes our freedom. But the counter argument to that is that election actually frees us from our sins. Instead of spending our time trying to redeem ourselves of our sin, we are free now to live as God’s children. God is more powerful than our sins.

The scripture I chose for today is from Matthew’s gospel. It has to do with authority and election. This passage takes place the day after Jesus has thrown the money-changers out of the temple. He returns to the temple and the temple leaders confront him and ask by what authority he acts. After all, he has come into their temple and upset the balance of power. Jesus does not answer their question because he knows that they already know the answer and no matter what he says they will use it against him.

Jesus then tells a parable about a father who has two sons. The father gives the sons a command. One says we won’t do it but then he does. The other says he will do what his father has asked but he does not. Which one, Jesus asks, does the will of his father. The people answer, *the first son*, because despite what he told his father, he obeyed his father’s request. Jesus than tells the temple leaders, *Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.* Why? Because those people, despite their outward appearances, have faith in God in their hearts. The temple leaders on the other hand—the Pharisees, Sadducees, elders and others—make a show of being righteous but do not always have God in their hearts. Like the second son, they say they do God’s will but then fail to follow through.

For us, being a Christian is not was not about what we do, it is about what we believe and what we hold in our hearts. The Scots Confession was one way of wiping the slate clean, of starting over—not just as a community, or a country, or even a church, but as a people of faith. It was an opportunity in 1560 to set aside the political quest for power and wealth and to focus on the spiritual essentials of being a Christian—of having faith in a God who loves us, of pushing aside all the unnecessary things, and committing ourselves to what is truly important.

The Scots Confession came to us at a time of great turmoil and revolt. It was a dangerous time for the Reformers. Many lives were lost. Those at the top were unwilling to relinquish their power. Yet, the protesters continued on. They fought the good fight and in the end they persevered. This confession is a reminder of who God is, who Jesus is, and what the church is. In it we confess that we are the children of God—loved by God, claimed by God, forgiven by God. Amen.

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I am indebted to Jack Rogers for his book *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1985.