

BOOK REVIEW

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Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation, 4 Vols. (1523-1693)

James T. Dennison, Jr.

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These four magnificent volumes, compiled and introduced by James Dennison, Jr., contain 127 confessional documents in the 171 years from the *Sixty-Seven Articles of Huldrych Zwingli* (1523) to the *Baptist Catechism* (1693)—on average one every sixteen months! Surpassing all previous compilations of Reformed confessions, including those contained in the second and third parts of volume 3 of Philip Schaff's *The Creeds of Christendom*, this is now the definitive, and by far the most complete, compilation in English of Reformed creeds from the foundational period of the Reformed churches.

The definition of “confessions” used in these four volumes is broader than usual, encompassing not only creeds, catechisms and canons, but also some church orders, theses for disputations and even theological treatises. “Reformed” in the title of these books embraces Zwinglians and Calvinists; Waldensians, Bohemian Brethren and Huguenots; Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and even (Calvinistic) Baptists. For the purposes of this review, the words “Reformed” and “confessions” will be used as in the four volumes, as just explained.

Almost all of these 127 confessions were produced in the European Reformed world of the British Isles and continental Europe, excluding Scandinavia in the north (Lutheran), Russia in the east (Eastern Orthodox), most of the south-east (Muslim and Eastern Orthodox) and most of the south (Roman Catholic). Thus we are speaking of the creeds of the Reformed communities in Ireland, Scotland, England (and Wales), the Lowlands (roughly Belgium and the Netherlands), France, Switzerland, Germany, Bohemia, Poland and Lithuania, and Hungary and Romania (Transylvania), as well as the Waldensians in southern France and northern Italy.

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Because of persecution and flight, two French and Walloon documents were drafted in England and Germany; a Walloon creed was written in Germany; three Dutch confessions in England; and four English creeds, with two in Switzerland and two in the Lowlands. The four volumes also include three Spanish confessions, written in Germany, Italy and England, and two Italian creeds produced in Switzerland, as well as the *Confession of Cyril Lukaris* (1629), a creed produced in Constantinople (now Istanbul in Turkey), the origins of which are as fascinating as they are little known, sadly.

Only two of the 127 creeds were produced outside of Europe: one in South America and the other in North America. The first, the *Guanabara Confession* (1558), was penned by some French Huguenots who migrated to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Whereas Cyril Lukaris was strangled by the orders of the Ottoman Sultan Murad IV and later dumped in the Bosphorus, most of the signatories to the *Guanabara Confession* were drowned by the French Roman Catholics. The second, the *Cambridge Platform* (1648), is the church polity of the English Congregationalists who left old England for freedom of religion in New England (USA).

Over half of the confessions in volume 1 (1523-1552) are Swiss Reformed. Volume 2 (1552-1566) is the most diverse geographically with almost all the European Reformed countries included (except Bohemia and Ireland), as well as Italian, Spanish and Brazilian creeds. The eastern part of the Reformed world (Hungary and Romania, Poland and Lithuania, Germany and Bohemia) provides eighteen of the twenty-three documents in volume 3 (1567-1599). England is the country with most creeds in volume 4 (1600-1693). If documents from English-speaking churches in Ireland, Scotland, New England and the Netherlands are added, English-language creeds constitute half of the confessions in the last volume.

Two cities stand out in connection with these confessional documents, with the first being Geneva. No less than thirteen creeds (over 10% of the whole!) were written in this little republic (as it was then), including two by English and two by Italian expatriates. As well as through its confessions, some of which were very widely used, such as *Calvin's Catechism* (1545), Geneva greatly influenced all parts of the Reformed world, particularly in the west, in many ways, some more obvious and others less direct and quantifiable. Here one should mention not only Geneva's noted theologians and their much

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circulated writings but also its famous academy and its numerous students, its busy publishing houses, its many refugees who stayed there briefly or permanently and its missionaries.

One city, however, surpasses even Geneva in the number of creeds in Denison's compilation. Twenty-two of its 127 confessions are from London, which means that more than one out of every six documents listed were produced in the British capital.

Volumes 1-3 contain five Anglican documents (Lambeth is in London) and four confessions or catechisms by Dutch (three) and Spanish (one) refugees (London is a port). But it is the last volume, which covers the seventeenth century, that marks London's rise to confessional prominence. Now the main groups that were no longer content with the half-reform of the Church of England produced a flurry of authoritative documents, and London was the centre for the Presbyterians (Westminster Abbey with six confessions), the Congregationalists (the Savoy Palace) with their two and the Baptists with five. Whereas Geneva's confessional fecundity declined through the volumes, London became the centre of creedal productivity through the deep and serious intra-Protestant debates in seventeenth-century Britain which focussed on the capital.

Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries teaches many lessons very necessary for our day. First, Reformed churches are not some new thing lately sprung up. We are rooted in a centuries-long tradition of faith, worship and life drawn from the sacred Scriptures. Second, the Reformed faith and Reformed churches are not merely parochial. We are international and truly catholic. Third, true Reformed churches are not creedless or anti-creedal (like Liberalism or Fundamentalism) or content merely with short or ecumenical creeds (like Evangelicalism). We hold to lengthy, developed and detailed creeds, the full-blooded confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Fourth, faithful creedal Reformed churches are not dry or dying or dead. Loving, knowing, preaching, witnessing to and suffering for the biblical truth of our creeds reveals that we live unto the Triune God by the grace of the incarnate Son who died and rose again for us.

On the contrary, it is shallow, trendy Evangelicalism, with its faddish, modern worship, its fascination with spurious charismata, its openness to Roman Catholic doctrine and its lack of the knowledge of God, which is the new kid

on the block ecclesiastically. Without historical and creedal roots, it is blown about with every wind of doctrine. It would be unrecognizable to the strong Reformed churches of the past, except that it bears uncanny resemblances to elements of the Anabaptist movement which they strenuously opposed! May the Lord be pleased to bring many individuals, families and churches from superficial Christianity back to the old paths of the biblical and Reformed confessions!

What else should we say about this largest-ever collection in English of the Reformed confessions from all the Reformed family in all the Reformed world in its foundational two centuries? It would serve well as the core text in seminary courses on the Reformed creeds and it is a vital resource for Reformed ministers and any wanting to learn more about our creedal heritage. From this compilation of Reformed confessions, one can trace the growth of the Reformed creeds, which is of great value in understanding the development of Reformed theology. Along with the very helpful, brief introductions to each of the confessions, this provides a fascinating perspective on Reformed church history. This set would also serve to better acquaint western Reformed believers with the eastern Reformed churches of Hungary and Romania, Poland and Lithuania, and Bohemia, which produced twenty-five of the 127 confessions, about 20% of the total.

James Dennison, we salute you! We commend you for your vision and perseverance in this grand project. For this, along with your work as editor of Francis Turretin's monumental three-volume *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, the Reformed church owes you a large debt. Thank you!

BRJ readers will be interested to learn of the contributions of Peter Vander-Schaaf, a BRF Conference attendee, who worked on the translation of the *Stafforts Book* (1599), the *Leipzig Colloquy* (1631) and the *Colloquy of Thorn* (1645). Our beloved *BRJ* editor, Rev. Martyn McGeown, revised the translation from the German of the *General Synod of Herborn* (1586).

There is one jewel in this treasure chest of confessional resources in which *BRJ* subscribers will be especially interested: the *Geneva Theses* (1649). For its clear and sharp opposition to well-meant offer theology, this short creed from Calvin's citadel—now available in English for practically the first time—deserves special attention in the next issue of the *BRJ*.