

Creeds and the Life of Faith
An Interview with Pastor Jim O'Brien (Full Transcript)

Jim O'Brien is a man deeply appreciative of the grace of God. Within the last two years, he describes coming to grips with his own sin and confusion, being humbled by God but brought to a renewed joy in His goodness.

Such humility is appealing in a scholar, and Jim is that. The bookshelves of his study groan under the weight of page upon page of Puritan and Scottish theology. With excitement and wonder Jim speaks of this antiquated works. Yet when I pop open the cover and my eyes drop to the page, I admit that reading is not a realistic option for me. I'm a theological lightweight, at least in this company.

James O'Brien is the pastor of New Covenant PCA, one of our sister churches in northeast Raleigh, and has been for seven years. He is a graduate of Westminster College (as he says, there are three famous people who graduated from Westminster - John Gerstner, R.C. Sproul, and Jim O'Brien) and Pittsburgh Seminary (where he received Master of Arts in Church History). Jim, wife Pam, and daughter Heather live in North Raleigh.

A few months ago Pete Shedor and I had an opportunity to interview Jim on the subject of creeds, confessions, and catechisms. Fueled by large amounts of pizza, he had a "few" thoughts, which we provide here, only slightly edited:

The Social Context of Creeds

STEVE: Jim, what we want to talk about today are the benefits and pitfalls of the use of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms, as well as similar creedal statements. Why don't you give us a little bit of background on the conditions under which these particular creeds originated as well as how they have been used by the church in the past.

JIM: The Westminster standards came out of the Puritan Revolution [English Civil War] when after a fair amount of oppression, the Parliamentary armies overthrew Charles I and had him executed over the objections of many ministers. In those days uniformity in religion, or at least unity in religion, was seen as being essential to unity in society and, therefore, stability for Government. A stable society makes for a stable Government. So diversity, like we have in America, they could not conceive would work. As a matter of fact, it doesn't work in the sense that with a total relativism we're seeing the collapse and isolation of the constituent parties in our country. But, that's another issue. The point is -- it is very difficult for people of different creeds to live together. (Yugoslavia would be a great example of that now.)

The up shot then was that they gathered together many of the brightest and best of the ministers of that day at Westminster Abbey, Westminster Cathedral, and established, for about four or five years, an assembly of divines. There were some layman in it and some members of Parliament, but mostly ministers, who gathered to set forth what in fact the Church of England should believe according to the scriptures, what did the scriptures teach on all the critical issues, the major topics of the faith. And so you get the Confession -- which is a statement of what the church believes.

All confessions, by their very nature, come out of conflict. We like to avoid

conflict, but the church is never allowed to avoid conflict because it is in world and there is an Evil One who goes about to destroy us. So he brings conflict to the church, and he enters as false brothers. When Paul is leaving the church at Ephesus in the Book of Acts and there is this weeping that they are never going to see him again, Paul is weeping too, but it is not because he is not going to see them again. He says, "Because I know when I leave that savage wolves are going to come in and ravage the flock." Well, that is because he knows the Evil One is at work.

So throughout the history of the church savage wolves have come into the church and sought to destroy it. Who the savage wolves were isn't always clear.

Everyone says the other guy is the savage wolf. So you've got a little bit of a problem, but you have to go back to the scriptures. All creeds end up doing, whether it is the Nicene Creed or the Athanasian Creed, or whatever, is to distill what the Church has decided the scriptures teach over against errors that the wolves were bringing in. And, by God's Spirit, the church has continually established the biblical doctrine in a very faithful way. Now not every creed has ever done that. There are bad creeds out there. And the wolfish flocks have their creeds too. We hope, by God's grace, that we, in fact hold to the scriptures, but you have to really search that out.

The Inescapability of Creeds

- STEVE: In fact Jim, it would not be too much to say that each person has their own creed, whether it is articulated or able to be articulated by them, wouldn't it?
- JIM: Well, if I came up to you and said "Steve, what do you believe?," you would say "I believe that..." Well, the Latin word for "I believe" is *credo*. So creed is simply the anglicized version of "I believe". So, for example, we start in the Apostle's Creed with "I believe that..." So, as soon as you tell me that you believe anything, you are telling me your creed. The question is, is your creed clear, is it internally consistent, is it complete? If your creed is not clear, then, you know, who is going to rally to an uncertain trumpet sound?
- STEVE: So creeds are an inescapable part of human existence.
- JIM: Well, confessing your faith is an inescapable part of being a Christian.
- STEVE: I see.
- JIM: Because we confess with our mouth our salvation. We believe in our hearts, then confess with our mouths that Jesus is Savior.
- STEVE: This reminds me of a wonderful Rich Mullins song that Pete and I were listening to on the way over here. Mullins takes the Apostle's Creed and sets it to music. One of the lines in the song says "I believe what I believe makes me what I am."
- JIM: That is exactly right. It is out of the heart that comes all of the good things and the bad things. It is what dwells in your heart that is what you are. So you want to have the Gospel of Christ dwell in your heart powerfully. And you want it to be complete. You don't want to have a whopsided faith because that is going to.... We are always in a battle with Satan, and if you are leaning to the left or the right, to the North or the South (he doesn't really care what way),

he'll give you a shove to go farther in that direction. [Theologian and Author] J.I. Packer calls the word "balance" horribly neurotic, and it is, but it is exactly the right word. We need to keep, as best we can, all the aspects of the faith together, because if we emphasize the law because we want to be Godly and righteous, Satan will say "You like law? I like law." And he'll push you into a legal spirit. You say "I don't want to be a legal spirit. I love the gospel." He says "You like the gospel? I love the gospel." He'll push you that way. He'll push you into a spirit of presumption and carelessness about righteousness. You say "I am forgiven. I can sin as I please."

STEVE: That's a good point you know. And it's not... See if you agree with this. It is not a life by the mean, that is, you don't average those things and live in the middle. It is that you have both extremes and you live in that balance.

JIM: Well, if you think about it you can only err in two ways, too much or too little. And so you have too much of something or too little of its complement. Most truth is like a coin. You know, you've got two sides. We are to die to sin and be alive to God. They are the same thing, but they're two aspects of the same truth, and so you can have too much or too little. And, in doing that, Satan is more than happy to, if he cannot destroy your faith, at least humiliate it and embarrass it. So we are in this battle, and the question is "Is my faith complete? Do I have a full grasp of the basic scriptural teachings that I need to live?" God didn't reveal things because they weren't important. I mean, he went to some fair amount of trouble to reveal it, preserve it, and pass it on to us. So, is it complete? Is it internally consistent?

You can't intentionally hold things in contradiction. You'll hear people say "I believe these things [doctrines] are a contradiction". It is often that they don't know that there are other options for them. But you can't hold to contradictions. It is simply that you are going to really hold to one, and you are really slighting the other and just giving it lip service. So if you want some internal consistency, you want to be complete, and you've got to be clear. You've got to be clear for yourself because, if it is all gobble-de-gooped in your head, it is not going to have any power in your life. And it is not going to be helpful in teaching your children. It is not going to be helpful in your witnessing.

STEVE: What you're saying is that a creed needs to be somewhat of a complete expression of your beliefs.

JIM: Well, for instance, the apostle's creed is not. It says nothing about justification by faith. So, it is a glaring omission. It doesn't mean the creed is false; it just means that it's incomplete.

STEVE: It's creedal, but it's not enough.

JIM: It's not enough.

STEVE: So for example, the Jewish statement, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one," is a creedal statement.

JIM: It's very much a creedal statement.

STEVE: But it's not complete.

JIM: No, it's not complete. In fact, in the way it is stated, it could obscure the trinity. I mean a Unitarian couldn't say that. He'd say it falsely. He'd say everything falsely. No, you want to be as clear as you can. Now, you can't confess the Westminster Confession every Sunday in church.

Communicating the Truth

PETE: Well, let me ask this Jim. You were getting to the point of the usefulness of these creeds in communicating with, say, your children and such. But, in as much as you are a growing person -- and let's take for example the illustration of your own life a couple of years ago when you went through this transformation over a period of two or three days and your faith changed significantly -- I assume that means your creed would change significantly.

JIM: No. Well, see that is the interesting thing. That was only six months ago. But my creed didn't change. On the contrary, I started to believe my creed. I started to actually act faithfully on the content. So, while my creed could not save me, when the Lord came to me very graciously, my creed was a very helpful thing because it was like a highway for faith. I knew what to believe. So I could think about Christ as a mediator, Christ as a prophet, priest, and king. I've known those things. I've taught on those things. But for me to start to actually access that He is my priest when I go and do something really ugly and indulge in some really wicked thoughts and can think "He's my priest" -- it really became precious to me. And then I could think "He's my king, he'll subdue me to himself," which is actually the language of the Lord's Prayer. "Thy kingdom come" -- that we would pray that he subdue us to himself. And I think "Oh yes, subdue me Lord, subdue me because I'm really in trouble here. I have this lustful spirit or hateful spirit in my heart and it's just having a field day and I need your help. I'm so glad you forgive me because of the fullness of your work as a priest." Or take for example the Calvinistic creed of the doctrine of the atonement. That Christ's atonement is effective, that it's specifically designed for us, is incredibly comforting when you believe it. When you believe these things, you say that He has most certainly atoned for any sin that I in fact do commit. So there is no barrier for me coming to God, except my own belief.

PETE: But won't you communicate differently now than you would have two years ago?

JIM: Well, your life is an illustration of your faith (or your unbelief). But, I think that people understand the difference between head and heart knowledge. We teach our children, and while they may not yet be converted we don't think it wrong to fill their heads with knowledge. Because that's the grasp that the spirit uses to bring them to faith in Christ. The knowledge of their being sinners. The knowledge that there is a savior.

STEVE: But at the same time you want them to experience that truth.

JIM: Well, absolutely. It's a dead letter if you don't experience it.

STEVE: In fact, to become their own truth they must experience it, right?

JIM: Well, God has to come and graciously open their hearts to believe. This faith is a gift of God.

The Practical Theology of Creeds

STEVE: Let's move on to consider some of the benefits the creeds hold for us.

JIM: Here would be a point I think is really critical. The catechisms and the confessions sit on the shelves of most people that even own them. They sit on the shelves of their houses gathering dust, including officers and ministers, because we approach them entirely incorrectly.

What made the Puritan Movement incredibly powerful was its emphasis on practical theology. And the Puritan Movement was the most powerful movement after the Reformation itself. For example, liberty comes out of Puritanism. Civil liberty, religious liberty, freedom of speech -- these are part of the Puritan heritage passed on to us. Now I'm not saying America was necessarily a Christian country, but these values which spread and won their way had never been in the world before Puritanism. Satan has so marvelously maligned Puritanism precisely because it was so purely the gospel. Now, I mean there were better Puritans and worse Puritans. I mean they had their errors as well. I'm not trying to idealize them, but I will say that there has never been in the history of the planet, to my knowledge, a greater generation of Christians than from 1580 to 1680. In that 100 years giants walked the land. I mean they were awesome men. You know they were awesome by simply reading their writings. I mean they were just tremendous.

When you look at the guys who are Reformed theologians today -- J.I. Packer, Sinclair Ferguson, even Warren Wiersbe out there in Chicago -- these are people who are deeply steeped in the Puritans. If you find a man who is having a big impact today, you'll find he is steeped in the Puritans. There's Sam Storms, the Baptist pastor who did his doctorate on [Jonathan] Edwards on original sin, or John Piper, who has written marvelous books on desiring God and the pleasures of God. This is all Jonathan Edwards. It's Puritanism. A lot of the guys that are having a big impact are standing on the shoulders of these people that have been maligned, and we need to not let our brothers, though dead, be maligned.

STEVE: What about people like John MacArthur or Charles Stanley or...

JIM: Well, I don't where Stanley is on all these things. Of course, he is a pretty outspoken opponent of Calvinism. But, I think that he probably doesn't... I mean, as in all things, I think he doesn't appreciate his [Calvin's] genius. At the same time, he is a good friend of [R.C.] Sproul. On the other hand, John MacArthur moved away from dispensationalism. Maybe not in its views of the Second Coming so much. I don't know where he is on that. But, in terms of grace, and his book on the gospel according to Jesus. It would be the statement that "Jesus must be Lord." Well, John MacArthur started to be really settled in his views on that from Don Kissler, the publisher of Sola Deo Gloria, a publisher of Puritan and 19th century Reformed reprints. He was out at MacArthur's church and knew MacArthur, and MacArthur has now written a lot of introductions for books reprinted by him. So MacArthur encounters the Puritans and says these guys are biblical. You can't miss it. I'm telling you, MacArthur is about as biblical a man as you are going to get. He is in his Bible all of the time. So he is reading these guys and they are stirring him. They are giving him an opportunity to look at the scriptures with sort of new glasses and he says "How did I miss this stuff before?" And then he goes back to the bible and he says "It's really there." Because the Bible is the authority, not the Puritans. But the

Puritans are brothers in the faith, though they happen to be dead. When the Robin Williams movie called "Dead Poet Society" came out, I got the thought that I would go down to State and sort of dent the theological society. Read all of these old Puritans, but it never materialized. I guess cowardness or something intervened.

The Puritans are just an amazing race of people who God blessed incredibly. We are foolish if we don't take advantage of their good things and even though we aren't going to take advantage of everything. You have to use your sense about what is good or bad, but there is just so much that is so much better than what we've got today. They were just really mature and they were mature because they were hammered in persecution. These were people who withstood incredible persecution. Thousands of them were burned at the stake and were drowned one way or another. These were people who freely fought for their faith, but retained the gentleness and peacefulness of Christ. I mean, we get people who are hammered and they get really mean. That shows our immaturity. Their maturity was demonstrated in their being gentle and gracious in the face of persecution.

To give you a taste of the Puritans, when the plague had broken out in London during a time when the Puritans were not allowed to preach, Puritan pastors from the country came and ministered all over London, and no one stopped them, because who wanted to go in and arrest them? And there are just stories upon stories about pastors going to house after house with dying people, houses full of plague, with reckless disregard for their lives because they were able to preach Christ. And preach Christ to people to who really needed them, because they were on the verge of eternity. So they were just amazing people. Now the confessions come out of that. The [Westminster] Confession itself has more of the marks of coming out of conflict, because a lot of its statements will refer to Catholicism.

But, the great things are really the catechisms for Christians. Both are wonderful. Both sets. The Catechisms have almost nothing of this debate. They really don't reflect the conflicts. I did a study recently comparing Catholic creeds and the Westminster standards to put creedal statements in juxtaposition for some evangelistic use I had here in the church. I just never got to quote the catechisms because they just didn't have the statements in that way.

We make a mistake in studying the catechism and confessions by looking at them as a statement of doctrine. And, in our society, that just doesn't wash. People aren't interested in just head knowledge and go to the bible to get information. So you've got this situation where we are reading them to get our orthodoxy right. And people instinctively say "What does that got to do with life?" "I need to live. I need to go out and work. I got to deal with a wife who is a finer Christian than I am. Or a rascally woman or something. I've got kids. I've got cars that break down and I don't have enough money." The people say "I'm not really interested in the abstract doctrines." But, if you'll go and read through the standards. Just sit and read. Don't read the proof text. Just read them and look for how you're to feel, what you're to do and that kind of experiential language. You'll find these documents are as thorough a statement of Christian experience as there are. But they are never studied that way. I have never seen a treatment of the Westminster standards from the point of view of experience.

Say you're reading on providence. Providence gets us into difficult issues of predestination and God's sovereign control and God's controlled limits of sufferings. And those are very difficult intellectual questions. They are doctrinal questions. And people take a modest to non-existent interest in them because they seem abstract. But you get to the last section, and it will say in there that this doctrine is being handled very carefully. And it is profitable for -- it lists off six or eight things -- adoration, reverence, and a variety of things, and you just take that and use that as prism to look through the whole discussion. It changes. It changes the whole way to approach the Confession or the catechisms. And that simply isn't done in our seminaries, and I don't know why it just isn't done. So these doctrines are intensely practical if you look at them that way. It's there, we just miss it. We are so busy trying to get the doctrine straight that we say "It's profitable for adoration. Oh, yes. I know that." And you move on. Instead of stopping and saying "Oh, yeh. Let's go back and go through what we just learned about providence and think about it as a matter of adoration. How does this produce adoration for God? Or reverence for God? Or contentment?" And to take the practical advice.

What made the Puritan movement so unique in Calvinism and the Reformation was its practical theology. Over in Holland, for instance, the Dutch were great giants in theology and technical abstract theology. They were just enormous scholars, but they didn't have much practical stuff at all. I mean, it was really the classic head knowledge kind of thing. So what happens is that they import Puritan theology, a lot of it, because Puritans in exile in Holland were preaching, so they had a flavor for what these men were doing. But lots of Puritan literature was translated into Dutch because they didn't have a native practical literature. In doing that then, history itself will tell us what was the real mark of these people. It wasn't their great theological acumen, though they had that. They were very fine and very sharp theologians. But it was their practical theology, and it was unique in the history of Christian church. When they wrote a Confession and they wrote catechisms, who they were comes out. They were intensely practical pastors who dealt with unconverted people, mixed marriages with converted/unconverted, who dealt with everything that a pastor could deal with and more. England, before the Puritans came, was not a particularly Christian nation. I mean, most people paid lip service to the Christian faith and lived kind of late 20th century secular lives. So these guys came into real conflict even pastorally. It wasn't a positive atmosphere for what they did. They lived difficult lives and they changed the way people lived.

STEVE: What I'm hearing here from you is that these documents are oriented toward, or, at least the catechisms, toward very practical experience, ways to...

JIM: Well, there is no doubt about it. For example, you want to know how to pray. And here you've got an exposition of the Lord's prayer. It's very rich if you meditate on it. Or, your Christian life, and obedience, the ten commandments, and the catechisms are very rich. In fact, if you are having some doubt that you are really a sinner, you go read through the Larger Catechism and think for a while and you'll come away just gasping for air. You'll find out you are such a sinner.

Language: A Stumbling Block

- STEVE: You know many people trip over the archaic language. Many people would say this is just too difficult to read and not of much use to me, because of that.
- JIM: Well, I think that that is both true and lamentable. I mean, some of the creeds are being put into modern English. And I think that's a good thing. We teach our children catechism here in the church with modern English. I have read a lot of 17th century literature, so I kind of like the archaic language, but it doesn't communicate unless you work at it. But, if I might say, I think that's really part of Satan's strategy. Here is the greatest Christian literature and these great creeds, and we have been cut off from them by a declining educational system which all of us went through, almost without exception. Now there is a home schooling movement, but the things that children could read in the 1930s we can't read today with much comprehension because of the watering down of the educational system. I think this has very clear implications in that Christians are being cut off from their past and, if it wasn't written in the last 30 years, then Christians are having a hard time accessing it, and that's poverty itself.
- Now, the other way to combat that it is to read the modern writers who are bringing the stuff back to bare. So, like a Packer or a Ferguson, a Piper, or somebody of that sort.
- STEVE: So, in essence, some of these modern authors like Packer are really re-expressing some of the ideas of the Puritans.
- JIM: Oh, yes. And ashamedly so.
- STEVE: Indeed, Packer's book Knowing God has been updated itself to Americanize it.
- JIM: Until just about a few years ago, I found Packer's book hard to read. I read it through and said "Oh, I like this." But see it did come from years of reading to where I had gotten to the place where I could read that. Part of reading more substantial literature is just keeping at it. And, if you can't read it when you are 20, then try at 30. If you can't at 30, try again at 40. But the one book no one should ever miss reading is Pilgrim's Progress. This is the greatest manual to the Christian life that you could possibly read. It sold millions of books, because it is so excellent.
- STEVE: Just because something is difficult doesn't mean that it's not profitable.
- JIM: Well, yes, and so you'd like to hope that people would press through for the value of it.
- STEVE: Like a good novel or, well, a good poem for example.
- JIM: Now see I wouldn't press through in poems.
- STEVE: But you could see where the rewards would be there.
- JIM: Byron [Curtis] could see where the rewards would be there, but I can't. He had a more aesthetic nature to him than I have.

Using Creeds in Corporate Worship

- STEVE: Well, to review, you've mentioned two of these benefits which stand out - personal study and your own personal worship, as well as communicating truth and experience to your children. Do these documents have any value in corporate worship?
- JIM: Well, actually, I think less. We have tried to use them in a creed time, in that portion of the service where we confess our faith. And I just found that they are too difficult, that they are too elaborate and the language is too archaic. The people are saying the words, but they are not comfortable, so we have had to cut that out.
- PETE: Do you substitute your own creeds?
- JIM: Well, no. We are using the Apostles Creed now, because we felt that it was important that our children know it. And in our children's church they are learning about our worship service piece by piece. So, we are going through the Apostles' Creed, because every Christian should know the Apostles Creed. Then if you are in an Episcopal Church or some other church and they use it, you're not standing there thumbing through the hymnals for this thing.
- STEVE: It is a great unifier.
- JIM: Yes, it is like singing the doxology or the Gloria Patri. They are traditional things every Christian should know. They are just useful. But I don't know that there is an easy solution to that issue of confessing your faith. We have, on occasion, used the Ten Commandments, one commandment per week for ten weeks as a prelude to confession of sin. I guess you could do a variety of those things, but that's not real important to me. When we were doing many things with creeds one brother came to me and said "You know Jim, we are reading a section of the Confession every week, but we are not reading a chapter of the Bible in the service." It was like "Oh, of course!" What a dummy. So, you know, there wasn't room, there was not enough time. So, you know, a chapter of the Bible came in and the Confession went out. You don't want to give the impression that the Confession is more important than the scripture. It's not. It's just a handy tool to get at it.

Appreciating History

- STEVE: I was going to ask you about that. Why would I want to teach my children the catechism rather than teaching them to memorize scripture?
- JIM: Well, you wouldn't want to make it either/or. Children must memorize scripture. Scripture is the word of God. It is living and vital and cuts, you know, between bone and marrow. But in any discipline, in any field of study, we start with elementary principles and build up. So you get an elementary introduction to sociology or computers. You get "Computers for the Numbskulls," you know, and you get that book out and you start and you work your way up ideally. In every field of endeavor we believe in systematizing and simplifying first principles and second principles and building up. That is exactly how it should be in the study of the Bible. We want to study the Bible, but you need to get the principles of the scriptural teaching. And that's not something you have to re-invent. I mean, the notion that I need

to stand with my Bible all alone and cut myself off from what the spirit has taught the Church for 2,000 years is not a humble statement. You know, it is not a humble statement. It may be a confused statement. It may not be arrogant, but it is not humble. I mean, God has raised up great men and women of the faith. And if we neglect to profit as we can then we are foolish.

And we don't actually live that way, because we go to church, we listen to a pastor, or we turn on a favorite pastor on the radio or TV, or we buy Charles Stanley's books or something because we think this man can help me understand the Bible. Well, it is really a dead theologians' society. Why am I confined to just modern pastors and teachers? I want to read modern men because they do speak with a freshness to my experience as a late 20th century Christian. But why should I be confined to those people? They don't have all knowledge or wisdom either.

A teacher of mine who is gone to be with the Lord was a wonderful church historian. He used to describe church historians as physicians of memory, because the church has a way of becoming lopsided in its own cultural battles and forgetting what the church had known. And physicians go back and say "Oh, don't forget this." Well, really, in bringing the Confession and Catechisms forward, we are really healing through peoples' memories, saying "Don't forget these truths too." They're not everything and we don't want to become antiquarians. We don't want to become old-fashioned in some way but, rather, we want to translate these things into your experience. They're full of scriptural truth.

STEVE: So there is a cultural thing operative here, in that Christians and the culture at large don't have an appreciation of history, don't care many times what happened in history, but feel that what happens today is all that's important. Do think that's true?

JIM: That may very well be. I think we just have lots of personal problems to wrestle with and we, as Christians in the late 20th century in America (middle class especially, but even blue collar Christians) have been raised as part of the Me Generation. And our prevailing sins will always be the sins of the Me Generation. I am always battling with what's in it for Jim O'Brien. Is this going to advance my glory? Is this going to advance my salary? You know, is this going to advance my esteem in the presbytery? And those are the things you really have to fight, but they're the endemic sins of our time and age.

Systematizing Truth

STEVE: So creeds are useful personally and in our families, but not too useful, you would say, in our corporate times of worship together.

JIM: We have not found a way to use them, but maybe another man might. But, for instance, we have a little child. The mother came to me one day and said "I've got to tell you the most amazing thing." The child had not done something that they had been tempted to do and had resisted a temptation. When the mother asked why, she said "Well, I cannot see God, but He always sees me." Well, that's the catechism answer on "Can you see God?", which deals with God's invisibility and His being a spirit. Well, that's a very practical thing. You know, "I cannot see God." You could leave it there as a doctrinal proposition, but then there is a practical side, "But He always sees me." There is a real application. There is a lot of that kind of thing where our children would get first principles

and then, when they finally leave us, we hope that the Spirit has brought them to saving faith. But they are well equipped to think clearly in the confusion of our society.

Our society is in a fair amount of intellectual confusion. You've got to know who you are and who God is and what He intended before we rush into issues such as, say, the abortion issue. There is an awful lot of despair and panic and frenzied activity because we see we are losing the [pro-life] battle. The Supreme Court didn't give us the victory two years ago that we expected. But then you come back and you think about Psalm 2 and you'll be fine. God sits upon the Heavens, the nations are raging and He mocks them and appoints a mediator, a savior. Or you could think about God's providence as it is laid out in the scripture.

Or you could be dealing with childlessness. Pam and I had to deal with not being able to have children and there you could think about God being God. Now, you could go to Hebrews 1 and be reminded that "faith is the substance of things not seen." But I don't always know how to put the scriptures together and, so what a confession or catechism does is to help me, to give me direction as I am looking at the scriptures. So, you do a topical bible study. Everybody has done a topical bible study at one time or another. You look up all of the verses. You follow your cross-references. And we try to get the disparate statements all over the Bible and pull them together and then we try to organize it and distill the essence of what the Bible says.

STEVE: What you're describing is basic to systematic theology.

JIM: Well, that *is* what systematic theology is. Everybody does it. They just don't call it that. But a lot of times you don't know how to deal with different texts, you don't know what God calls you to do in your life. How am I supposed to live in regards to my money for instance? How much am I supposed to give away? I feel guilty because I see children on TV, you know, with Sally Struthers telling me how they are starving. They *are* and I don't know how to deal with that. I don't know how to deal with all of the scriptural texts.

One of the things that creeds and confessions do is that they give you pointers and options. Sometimes we fall into an error because we don't know there are any other options. So we look at a text and we say "It seems to say that." So you look at 1 John. I remember a man terrorized me once by saying, you know, "that Christians can't sin." Well, my feeble faith just went down in flames, because I knew I was sinning left and right. But I didn't know how to answer him, because that is what the text said. It just said it you know. It was just simple Bible. He was quoting the Bible. But obviously the Bible doesn't teach that. For a host of reasons, we know the Bible doesn't teach that. But I didn't have the options. I wasn't equipped with more options to think through what was wrong with his interpretation of that verse. And verses don't always fit real neatly. You have to think about them. God has left the scripture in such a way that the sincere will not stumble. That's the doctrine scriptures clarity. But the wicked or insincere will fall into confusion.

STEVE: You have mentioned the benefit then of having this system. Is there a corresponding pitfall?

The Life of Faith

JIM: Yes, well, I haven't mentioned the greatest benefit though. I want to go back to that before I do pitfalls. The preeminent image in scripture for the Christian life is that it's a life of faith. Trust in Christ at a whole variety of levels. And that's very much what has been happening in my life, is trying to learn how to live by faith, instead of my scrambling. Jack and Rosemary Miller talk about how you either choose to live as a son, which is your privilege in Christ, or you live like an orphan. I have spent seven years of my ministry living like an orphan. I had no one to take care of me, no one to build this church. And I can remember a time in my life when I said -- rashly, of course, I would never say it publicly -- that "If God isn't going to build this church, I was going to build it." And that's just the way it was going to be. I was not going to fail. But see that is not living by faith. There are a lot of ways that we don't live by faith, where we live as orphans, we have to scramble for ourselves, instead of our father providing.

The point is that this faith has to have an object. It is not just faith in faith. Life magazine has come out with this article about prayer and how prayer makes people better you know. This has no reference to God at all. If you are just kind of pray or have people pray, it is like psychic energy. Now do we really believe that prayer is just psychic energy? No. We believe there is a God in heaven who hears, whatever other benefits there may be. The point is that faith isn't just this vague kind of thing. It has to have an object. So when I sin, I need to know Jesus is a mediator. Or when I face the future and I am afraid of what's going to happen, because I don't control my future, and I face the prospect of death down the line -- What is it going to be? Heart, stroke or cancer? I am really thrilled of my options! -- I need to be able to believe, you know, in the things that scripture teaches me about God. That God is good and God is wise, and when bad things happen that God is good and wise. It is a real challenge to believe that.

What a creed and confession does is to give you in sharp, crisp definitions, statements of Biblical truth. Scriptures would be superior in their own right. But the completeness of a catechism question is valuable. You can say "I know this truth about God. I am in this battle with sin. I am being tempted not to believe." Because that is always where the temptation is finally. If I am tempted in some sexual lust, what I am really being tempted to believe is not to believe God, that His ways are best. I am being tempted to think that he is cheating me of pleasure that would make my life fuller or richer, which, in fact, it wouldn't do. Bitter experience doesn't feel like richer or fuller, it just makes your life more painful. But we will fall into the lie because we are flesh.

STEVE: Immediately when you say those things, scriptures spring to mind that would apply. But, the catechism question is a springboard to the completeness of that, I guess you would say.

JIM: Well, yes, because a scripture text might not say everything you want to say on a doctrine. That is why we do topical study. But I don't want to put those in juxtaposition. It seems to me it could be both. We have vast abilities mentally. We can learn scriptures *and* catechisms. So I don't want to put them in opposition. If people want to learn scripture, you know, that's just grand. But they are going to eventually want to organize their scriptural knowledge. And we've got this wonderful tool already in place. So rather than re-invent the wheel, better to simply take advantage of what we have and move forward. It would be like somebody wanted to do computers and say "I'm gonna invent a

computer from scratch." This is not wise. It may be possible, but it is not wise.

STEVE: Indeed, when you look at the scripture memory programs you can see that they organize scripture for you. They put it together systematically.

JIM: So, if I want to live by faith, I have to be sure that I have lots of things to believe in. God is a spirit, infinite and eternal and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. Now, I can rattle all of that off and it means nothing. But when I come into all kinds of situations when I remember who God is, or when I'm worrying about the future of New Covenant [Church] -- Is it going to grow? Are we going to get through some of our challenges? -- then I start to think about this Being. Then it strengthens me to believe. It challenges me. It encourages me to believe. But you have to put Christ in front of you, or the scriptural truth in front you, for faith to have something to reach out to. So it is like [Gresham] Machen used to say "For every one look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ." He understood that the object of faith had to be in front of you for you to see it. Faith sees Christ and believes. So I think creeds and confessions are helpful as objects of faith. They summarize Biblical truth and are helpful in encouraging and fortifying faith. The whole Christian life is about faith. So you cannot know too much of scriptural truths, because you will find that you will always be challenged to the limits of your knowledge and beyond. It's better to have a lot of faith than a lot of knowledge.

STEVE: And isn't it true that the more you know and the more completely you know, the better you can worship, the more awe and the more reverence you have for God.

JIM: Oh, there is just no doubt. Well I want to say the priority is on faith by and large. I mean, you can have a simple person who can just say "Jesus loves me, this I know" and they can have great worship. They might not understand a lot of things. But, if you have more capacity, if God has just created you to be a person with more questioning capacity, well then you are going to have to deal with that. You can't live like a simpler person who has a lot easier time in life, because that's just who you are. You have to live as who you are. I mean, if you were, you know, one of our seminary professors who is really able, you're going to have to live at that level. And if you are a simpler soul, maybe even mentally challenged, as we'll say, you know, maybe a person with, say, Downs syndrome or something, then your faith would be very simple, but it would meet your capacity and honor God. Well, wherever you are, you've got to be true to yourself. You can't live lower than yourself and you can't live higher than yourself, but faith is always going to be first.

If I am stuffing my mind with knowledge and I'm not exercising faith, it is going to puff me up and become a snare. So I want to be really digesting truth and exercising faith on it. And that is where memorization of any sort comes in, because to memorize it, you have to think about it over and over and over.

STEVE: You're really talking about a meditation on scripture. Memorization is the key to that.

JIM: Yes. Of course, you know, the Catechisms and Confession come with proof text. So even in the printing of them, we are not isolating them from scripture. As I

say, it is just a tool to help you get at the Bible.

The Pitfalls: Overestimated

JIM: Now, for pitfalls! Pitfalls are many. You know, people tend to think that if we have strong views on things that that's divisive. It is a real challenge to conform in Presbyterian churches. But I would say that our convictions are not divisive. And the Confession and creeds are not in themselves divisive, but divisive men use them. And divisive women use them. Anything can be used to divide believers. But if I am confident in what I think God has taught (and I know I am not infallible and God has more things to teach me), I can nonetheless say "This is where I am today." Because God is sovereign I can be at peace with that, even though I strive for more. I don't have to be frantic. And if my brother disagrees with me, I don't have to see him as my enemy. For example, a charismatic worships God and understands the scripture differently. Yet I don't have to see him as my enemy. If you want to be a divisive man, you use the Reformed faith and say "Those are the bad guys. They are the enemies, or they are the enemies of God's kingdom and we are its defenders." But that's not the fault of the Reformed faith. That's the fault of your faithless, unbelieving, arrogant heart. What I ought to be able to say is "I thank God for brothers who have faith. And if God has shown me more than them, God is very good. I hope that God has shown me as much as he has shown them."

One of the reasons I think charismatics actually see more in their ministries, more fruit, is not because I think they are more correct. I think they are often times in greater error and less orthodox, but I think they have a lot more faith. And if you are going to put them in juxtaposition like that and say "What pleases God? Orthodoxy or faith?" There is no question. God loves faith. I think God, in His great grace, overlooks a lot of error and loves faith. We need to be people with great faith. So, you know, any time you have knowledge, the problems with creeds and confessions is the same thing as the problems with knowledge. So you study your Bible. What does it say are the dangers of knowledge? Knowledge puffeth up. Knowledge divides. I am of Paul. I am of Apollos. So you have these kinds of things. It can tempt us to be prideful. It can tempt us to an imbalance in our lives in emphasizing pet doctrines that tickle our pride because we know them not others. It is always astonishing to me about my own life, that, having been an ardent student and defender of the Reformed faith, whose very fundamental principle is that you are utterly helpless and God came to you in free sovereign grace, which is the most humbling of doctrines, that this very doctrine would in my life produce so much pride and arrogance, just the opposite of what it should. It really shows you the insidious character of the flesh. By God's grace, that's changing, so that, as I come to really appreciate grace in Christ, I increasingly have more faith in Him. I've come to understand just how ruined my life has been by my own sin and how much I still continue to tear away at it. By His grace He overcomes that.

The Reformed faith teaches me these things most pointedly. When I am in my greatest difficulties, because I have fallen into some sin, or I'm depressed for one reason or another, exhausted, or sick, or maybe I just haven't been believing very much and gone on being busy. I love to be busy. And, if you are busy, you often don't take time to be believing.

It is a real battle that we face. The flesh only knows obey and be happy, disobey and die. And that's the spirit of the flesh. That's why it hates God so

much. It doesn't know anything about mercy or grace. I sit there and I'm challenged, you know, "Does God really love me?" And then I think about the doctrine of election. God doesn't change. That I know, because I believed in Jesus, His son, which is what the scripture says I must do to be saved. Those whom He saves He has loved. He has loved them eternally. They have been the apple of His eye from all eternity, something so tender that He won't allow anyone to touch it. That comforts me.

What's its practical use? It's like this: When I am doing well and I'm happy with God and God is happy with me, we are walking in the garden together you know. And then I step outside the garden and sin. Then I am tempted to think "Oh no. It's all gone." I spent almost all of my ministry living that way, "We are really in the suit now, God really does hate you, He was good to you and you weren't faithful." But the doctrine of election says to me "You change all the time O'Brien. You are just like a revolving door to get into a department store. You change all the time. But God doesn't change. His love is constant and eternal. It is as eternal and constant as He is." That's the doctrine of election. Now that is not a doctrine to scare people away from Jesus. That is a doctrine to make me hold onto Him because it is a doctrine that says "Don't run away when you sin. I haven't changed." That's marvelous stuff. See that is marvelous, marvelous stuff!

Then I think of how God chose to put me in Christ, which is an utterly astonishing thing to me, about Christ on the cross and how He died for my sins, everyone of the those foul, putrid things. He has already taken care of them. How many brothers are free to believe that, and do in their hearts, because in the heart of hearts the spirit has taught them the truth? Whatever their minds may say their hearts know better. But it is a comfort to me when my mind can agree with my heart and I don't have to have this conflict between my theology and my experience.

William Ames, one of the great architects of Puritanism and one of the great grandfathers of the Westminster standards, started his book on theology by saying "Theology is the science of living under God." It is all practical. The essential point of the Bible and those creeds that reflect the Bible is that truth is for life, and the more you understand that the more you will live, the happier you'll live, the better you'll live, and the more you'll honor God. And you'll honor God by, to some degree, conquering your sins, but even more by confessing your sins and confessing that Jesus is a great savior. I think the great deception we have is that, especially for the omni-competent people who work in the Triangle who are just so able and paid to prove it, is that we think we can do this Christian life. The thing that Jack Miller has been teaching me through his tapes and books is that you can't do this Christian life. You can't do a quiet time right. You can't do anything right. I can't preach perfectly. But the real power of the Christian is not that I have it together, but that I confess that I don't and that Jesus is a savior of men like me.

Somebody wrote once that "It is impossible for me to be seen as a great minister and Jesus as a great savior at the same time." And that is true of every Christian. It is impossible for me to think I am a terrific Christian *and* that Jesus is a great savior. Better that we come clean and say "I am a great sinner and He is a great savior." Because that is the gospel and that is exactly what the standards say. They are really wonderful for saying that.