

STANDING UP FOR JESUS

Text: 2 Timothy 1:13-14

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If New Zealand is known as the 'Land of the Long White Cloud' what is Australia? The 'Land of the Long Weekend'! Today is 'Australia Day' and typically it's a long weekend. Australia Day is a time to reflect on our history and identity. What are our traits that identify us as Australian? Is it 'football, meat pies, kangaroos and Holden cars'? Who we are today has been affected by our history and our defining documents, like the 'Australian Constitution' that officially forms us into one nation. Now the same thing can be said of our church. We are defined by our history and our defining documents. 'Hope in the Hills' is part of the Christian Reformed Churches of Australia. Our particular history stems from the Reformation and the documents that define us are our 'creeds' and 'confessions'. Our denomination is a 'confessional church', meaning we hold to the teachings of the Bible and we have a set of documents that outline what it is we believe the Bible teaches. In that sense we are like the Presbyterians who have their 'Westminster Confession', the Anglicans who have their 'Thirty Nine Articles', the Lutherans who have their 'Book of Concord'; and so it goes for most denominations. The Reformed Churches have two sets of documents. There are the 'Ecumenical Creeds' which all major denominations hold to, such as the Apostle's Creed, The Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed. These are shorter, simpler documents that briefly outline the main teachings of the Bible. And then there are the 'Three Forms of Unity' which are the Heidelberg Catechism, The Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort. These are much more detailed documents that outline the uniquely Reformed understanding of the Bible.

Now the question is why should we have these confessions. People will say 'Teach the Bible not man made doctrine. Isn't the Bible enough?' Well, there are two basic reasons. The first is as a 'statement of what we believe. The word 'creed' comes from the Latin word 'credo' which means 'I believe'. So with a 'creed' or 'confession' we are

admitting, 'this is what we believe; here is where we stand on this issue'. Confessions unify us as a church. Because they are written we can read them and study them together. We can together state our belief. The second reason we have confessions is as a defence. The confessions of our church were written to defend the gospel against wrong views of their times. Now it is important to understand that these two things are in fact following what the Bible says we should do. Look at what Paul instructs Timothy: (1:13(a) *"What you have heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching"*; (14(b) *"Guard the good deposit entrusted to you"*. Paul wrote this second letter to Timothy knowing he was a veteran preacher who would soon be martyred for Christ. So he is making sure that his protégé is prepared to take over. Over and over again he calls on Timothy to stand up for Jesus, to be firm in his faith. Why did Paul need to do that? What is it that can tempt a Christian to stand back rather than stand up? Well it could involve personal stuff. Timothy was young, he tended to be timid. His health was not the best. He may have experienced spiritual failure in the past. Paul calls on Timothy to *"flee the desires of youth"*. And Timothy was no Paul. He was a very ordinary person and no spiritual giant like the Apostle. There was also opposition and persecution. Paul was in prison for preaching the gospel. Timothy would have wondered if he would be next. Some of the folk in the church then were so intimidated by the opposition they had given up. Paul is about to die. He wants to make sure that the gospel, the great news of salvation by Christ alone is not distorted or lost. You can see the consequences are huge. So Paul challenges Timothy to stand up for Jesus and says how to do it.

First he encourages this young pastor *"What you have heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching"*. Timothy is to 'keep' what he has 'heard' from Paul. 'Keep' means to 'have as your own possession, preserve it'. In other words, 'hang on to what I taught you. Make it your own and never ever let it go'. Timothy is encouraged to take over Paul's teachings so that he has a *'pattern of sound teaching'*. The word 'pattern' has the idea of 'a set standard'. In other words 'this is the template and you must teach exactly the same.' So Timothy could not just make up his own ideas about Jesus. He had to follow Paul's system of teaching. That was to ensure what he preached and passed onto the next generation was 'sound'. The 'doctrine' or teaching had to be correct. As we said there was already pressure on Timothy. Wrong teaching had been given by 'Phygelus and Hermogenes'. Timothy needed to be very clear where he stood and preach it. Now when we as a church write a creed or confession we are doing

what Paul instructed Timothy. We are making the teachings of the Apostle our own. From the Bible we see the 'pattern'; we see a system of teaching. Through faith we accept the gospel, we accept the teaching and we take it on as our own. Through the Bible God is speaking to us. In our creeds we as a church respond and speak back to God. We are saying, 'Yes God, we believe and trust your Word about Jesus. Here is how we understand it.' That is what a 'creed' or 'confession' is. To 'confess' to something is to admit to its truth. It is an admittance of belief, accepting God's truth for ourselves. Now we actually do this often. A person says 'So you're a Christian are you? What do you believe?' And you say 'I believe what the Bible says, what it says about Jesus'. And they say 'So what does the Bible say?' Do you then recite the whole Bible or at least recite the New Testament? No, you give a brief summary. You outline what is important, like God creating everything, sin, who Jesus is and what he did on the cross. In doing that you have made a simple creed, a simple concise statement in your own words of the main points of the Bible's message. It's not helpful, as I've heard people say 'we have no creeds but Christ'. People who say that may not have a written creed but they definitely have a system of teaching in their mind of what they believe and can tell you pretty quickly where they differ with your beliefs. When we as a church have our confessions written down we are able to say to anyone and everyone: 'Here is what we believe. This is where we stand. You can read it for yourself. We trust in Jesus and hold to God's Word. And we are not ashamed of it'. As Paul said to Timothy (1:8) *"Do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord"*. It is in this vein that our Belgic Confession was written in 1561 by Guido De Bres a Reformed minister of the "Lowlands". He wrote this 'confession' to declare to the government of the day 'this is what we believe, here is where we stand'. The Netherlands at the time was governed by Catholic Spain. They interpreted the Reformed belief as 'heretical' and the Reformed people as 'rebels and disturbers of the peace'; and persecuted them accordingly. De Bres with the 'Belgic Confession' was declaring 'we are not heretics but Christians, not rebels but law abiding citizens'. 'Look read for yourselves. This is what we believe. See if isn't what the Bible teaches'. In his letter to the Spanish king De Bres promised that the Reformed people would obey the government in all things. But, he wrote, "...they would offer their backs to the stripes, their tongues to the knife, their mouths to the gags and their whole bodies to the fire..." rather than deny the truth in the Belgic Confession. And that is what happened! Over time thousands of Reformed folk were put to death by the sword or burned at the stake. Paul was persecuted for preaching the gospel. Timothy had to be prepared to stand for Jesus in the face of

opposition. Our Reformed forbears from France and the Netherlands were persecuted for the faith. They were all willing to stand up for Jesus, openly confessing to the truth of the gospel. What about us? Will we be persecuted? One of the great things about Australia is our religious freedom. When Captain Phillip came to Sydney and raised the flag on 26th January 1788 he had an evangelical Anglican as his chaplain. But not long ago a Sydney evangelical Anglican expressed the fear that his grandchildren may well be persecuted for the faith. Christianity is not so well accepted any more in our country. Australia is one of the hardest places in the world to evangelise. And openly expressing a Christian viewpoint in the public arena is becoming less tolerated by many people. Are we disciples of Jesus? Are we willing to openly confess what we believe? Are we willing to stand for Jesus?

Now there is a tendency to say 'I'm willing to stand for Jesus, to stand as a Christian but not as Reformed. We should play down our confessions and not let them divide us as Christians'. I understand the feeling because there have been too many bitter arguments. But the intent is naïve. Just imagine that Christians from all sorts of backgrounds are together in one big church and no official creeds. A friend of mine went to such a community church. They wanted their baby baptised. The minister didn't agree in child baptism but said my friend could get someone else to do the baptism in that church. You can imagine the confusion that caused as children asked parents why that baby was being baptised and why they weren't. Not only is there confusion, but eventually the group will have to make up its mind and that will cause division. To try and stay together they would have to accept a lowest common denominator meaning their theology would not be precise and nuanced. When a church's understanding of the faith becomes vague then eventually the central truths of the gospel are lost. And here again is where the confessions have their great value: to keep clear in our minds what the gospel is really about. The creeds are there to defend the gospel about Jesus. This is what Paul is getting at when he says (1:14) *"Guard the good deposit that is entrusted to you."* The 'good deposit' is a 'priceless treasure'; it is something incredibly valuable and beautiful. It is the astounding news of God's grace through Jesus' death and resurrection. It is so valuable because it is what provides hope for the creation. Paul tells Timothy to 'guard' it, that is, to defend and protect it. It is far too precious to be lost. The hope of billions of people rests on the gospel. And what Paul said to Timothy applies to us as church today. God has entrusted his Word to the care of the church. It is the calling of the church to preach

the Word, to teach it, to defend it. That is the prime reason why the Athanasian Creed was written. In the early church a man called Arius wanted to make the doctrine of the Trinity more understandable. He could not accept the idea of one God but three persons. So he argued that Jesus was not God but just a creation of God; the greatest of God's creation, he said, but not God. Now this teaching ends up wrecking the gospel about Jesus. If Jesus is not God then he could not have paid the full punishment for sin. That requires eternal hell and only God can experience eternity in a moment. If Jesus was a mere human he would still be suffering hell and then there would not be forgiveness and eternal life by grace alone. It might be subtle but the implications are huge. We might say yes but that is an ancient heresy. No its not; there are groups that hold to it today in various forms, who all end up pushing salvation by works instead of grace. That is the issue with the distortions to the teaching of the Bible. They end up ruining the 'priceless treasure' of the gospel and taking away the assurance of knowing we are reconciled with God through grace. We guard the good deposit so that people will not miss out on hearing the good news. If we want to be true to our name 'Hope in the Hills' and provide hope then we need to defend the gospel.

Now how we go about doing that is very important. If we see ourselves as right and everyone else is wrong then we are misrepresenting what Paul is saying in our text. Notice how he says: *"Keep the pattern of sound teaching...with faith and love in Christ Jesus....Guard the good depositwith the help of the Holy Spirit."* Our church is not our doing which we are proud of and defensive about. Our church is the work of Jesus and his Spirit. It is the love and humility of Jesus that brought us forgiveness as he willingly went to the cross. It is that love and humility that draws us to him. And it is with love and humility that we reveal what Jesus is like. So to defend the wonder of the gospel with a sense of arrogance is to undercut its teaching. And we are to be constantly led by the Spirit as to what God is saying to us in his Word. The Word of God never changes. But our creeds and confessions may need to as we understand more clearly. We may need to learn new insights or refine old ones as we study our Bibles or are challenged by other Christians or life events in God's providence. But that does not change the fact that we will still need to stand up for Jesus. It may well be that even in our beautiful country of Australia and our relaxed culture it will be more difficult to be a Christian. But the challenge is for us, as disciples of Jesus, to say 'This

is what we believe, this is the good news about Jesus. Here we stand and we are not ashamed'. We must do that if we are to bring hope to the hills.