

THEOLOGY'S PASSIVE VOICE

Joseph D. Small
Office of Theology and Worship
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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Schoolteachers caution against it, editors abhor it, even computerized grammar checks try to eliminate it – the passive voice. Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* pronounces the active voice direct, vigorous, and clear. The passive voice is considered by most to be circuitous, weak, and indefinite. The active voice produces forceful writing, giving life and significance to exposition. The passive voice is, well, *passive* – acted upon rather than acting. And yet, it is precisely “being acted upon” that may make the passive voice a distinctly theological voice.

But now the righteousness of God
has been manifested apart from the law. . . .
For there is no distinction:
for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,
and are justified by his grace as a gift . . .
Then what becomes of our boasting?
It is excluded. . . .
For we hold that one is justified by faith
apart from works of the law. (Rom 3:21-28)

We boast of our action. We present ourselves as the subject of every sentence, acting upon a range of objects in order to work our will. The Scriptures speak in a different voice, however. We are the acted upon ones, the objects of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. We are graced, loved, and drawn into communion with God and with one another, and it is only as recipients that we can become faithful actors.

The church's “rule of faith” sets us within theology's passive voice. The rule of faith – *regula fidei* – is not a relic of the early church's life, no longer relevant in a pluralistic age. The rule of faith is a summary of God's Way in the world, a Way that sweeps us up in its movement. It is also *the church's* rule of faith. The faith's shape is given to those who are called by God through the voice of the church, rather than constructed by individuals who choose to believe. Following the line of “church as mother” set out by Cyprian, Calvin makes a theological point about the visible, actual church: “For there is no way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels. Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives.”¹

The rule of faith found first expression in the summaries of Christian faith taught to new believers by their local bishops and confessed at baptism. These summaries were specific to each bishop's diocese, and so their details varied from place to place. Yet the summaries were not widely divergent, for all were instances of a shared *regula fidei* that provided a norm of Christian faith and life. As early as the second century, Irenaeus set forth an already traditional summary of Christian faith, concluding with the assertion that "Having received this preaching and this faith, as I have said, the Church, although scattered in the whole world, carefully preserves it, as if living in one house. She believes these things [everywhere] alike, as if she had but one heart and one soul, and preaches them harmoniously, teaches them, and hands them down as if she had but one mouth."²

We may recognize in Irenaeus' images an idealized portrait of the church's unanimity, but this should not diminish our awareness of the early church's substantial agreement about the shape of its faith. The *regula fidei*, its expression in catechesis, and its summaries in baptismal confessions of faith, provided a basic digest of the Christian story and the focal point of Christian identity. While expressions of the rule of faith were not fixed, they summarized the same scriptural story and shared the same three-part structure, with clauses about God the Father, the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit. Its narrative structure in both teaching and liturgy told a story, and that story summarized the gospel through a synopsis of the Scriptures. At the end of the second century, Tertullian provided a striking rendition of the *regula fidei*:

The rule of faith – to state here and now what we maintain – is of course that by which we believe that there is but one God, who is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced everything from nothing through his Word, sent forth before all things; that this Word is called his Son, and in the name of god was seen in divers ways by the patriarchs, was ever heard in the prophets and finally was brought down by the Spirit and Power of God the father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, was born of her and lived as Jesus Christ; who thereafter proclaimed a new law and a new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles, was crucified, on the third day rose again, was caught up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of the Father; that he sent in his place the power of the Holy Spirit to guide believers; that he will come with glory to take the saints up into the fruition of the life eternal and the heavenly promises and to judge the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both good and evil with the restoration of their flesh.³

Tertullian followed his rendition of the *regula fidei* with the counsel that "Provided the essence of the rule is not disturbed, you may seek to discuss as much as you like. You may give full reign to your itching curiosity where any point seems unsettled and ambiguous or dark and obscure."⁴

Indeed, the *regula fidei* in both its unity and its variations did leave some things unsettled and ambiguous, if not dark and obscure. Chief among the ambiguities that needed clarification were the relationships among the three main "characters" in the story: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The church's first formal attempt to resolve that ambiguity resulted in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. The Nicene Creed did not emerge full-blown from the deliberations of the church's bishops, however. The Creed's roots were deep in the church's baptismal life, and thus in the church's rule of faith.

The Nicene Creed occupies a singular place among all the confessional statements of the churches. It is not simply age or ubiquity that sets it apart, although these are significant attributes. Instead, Nicea presents us with a certain “dogmatic irreversibility.” The church, at a particular time in its history, was presented with a dramatic choice in which it determined that fidelity to the gospel required one articulation rather than another. The choice made at Nicea gave expression to the fundamental trinitarian and christological witness of the church, and so decisively determined the future of Christian thinking, professing, and confessing the faith. The affirmations of the Nicene Creed shape the affirmations of the creeds, confessions, and catechisms that follow. There is a sense in which later confessions can be seen as contextualized implementations of the Nicene (and Apostles’) Creed. Its voice resonates deeply throughout my own church’s *Book of Confessions* and within the whole church’s ongoing articulation of the faith.

The lines between the ancient rule of faith and the Apostles’ Creed are even more direct. Although the fixed form and authoritative status of the Apostles’ Creed was determined in the ninth century, its connection to the Old Roman Creed and thus to the *regula fidei* is apparent. Its ongoing liturgical use in Baptism preserves its grounding in the received faith of the church. Thus Calvin says at the conclusion of Book 2, “I have followed the order of the Apostles’ Creed because it sums up in a few words the main points of our redemption, and thus may serve as a tablet for us upon which we see distinctly and point by point the things in Christ that we ought to heed.”⁵

The rule of faith is not merely a historical curiosity, then. It comes to us in the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, and, for Presbyterians at least, it comes with the explicit sanction of our church: “In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) gives witness to the faith of the Church catholic. The confessions express the faith of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church in the recognition of canonical Scriptures and the formulation and adoption of the ecumenical creeds, notably the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds with their definitions of the mystery of the triune God and of the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ.”⁶ The rule of faith is given to us. The rule of faith that is given to us is expressed in the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds.

It has often been noted that the ecumenical creeds, precisely as expressions of the rule of faith, are the grammar and syntax of the church’s articulation of faith and faithfulness. The creeds set out the function and relations of Christian language within a congruous structure, indicating *how* we are to believe as well as *what* is to be believed (and what is to be avoided). As the rule of faith, the ecumenical creeds provide rules for Christian discourse. They are not Christian discourse itself, however. Outside of the liturgy, it is not sufficient simply to repeat the creeds. We may and should follow Tertullian’s lead: provided the essence of the rule is not disturbed, we may discuss as much as we like, inquiring more deeply into matters that are comprehensible as well as those that seem unsettled and ambiguous or dark and obscure.

The catechisms of the church are primary instances of deeper inquiry that adhere closely to the essence of the rule. Reformed catechisms follow the regular pattern of

Creed, Ten Commandments, Lord's Prayer.⁷ The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s new *Study Catechism* illustrates both the stability of the rule, and the inquiry and discussion that must follow. The first question in the *Study Catechism*'s section on the Apostles' Creed, "What does a Christian believe?" is answered, "All that is promised in the gospel. A summary is found in the Apostles' Creed, which affirms the main content of the Christian faith." The next question follows naturally: "What is the first article of the Apostles' Creed?" Recitation of the first article is hardly sufficient to begin exploration of "all that is promised in the gospel," however. The catechism follows with a whole series of questions prompted by the Creed:

What do you believe when you confess your faith in "God the Father Almighty?
 How do you understand the love and power of God?
 What comfort do you receive from this truth?
 Do you make this confession only as an individual?
 When the creed speaks of "God the Father," does it mean that God is male?
 Why then does the creed speak of God the Father?
 When you confess the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, are you elevating men over
 women and endorsing male domination?
 If God's love is powerful beyond measure, why is there so much evil in the world?
 What do you believe when you say that God is "Maker of heaven and earth"?
 What does it mean to say that we human beings are created in the image of God?
 What does our creation in God's image reflect about God's reality?
 What does our creation in God's image reflect about God's love for us?
 As creatures made in God's image, what responsibility do we have for the earth?
 Was the image of God lost when we turned from God by falling into sin?
 What does it mean to say that Jesus Christ is the image of God?
 What do you understand by God's providence?
 What comfort do you receive by trusting in God's providence?
 What difference does your faith in God's providence make when you struggle against
 bitterness and despair?
 Did God need the world in order to be God?
 Why then did God create the world?
 Does your confession of God as Creator contradict the findings of modern science?

The list of questions draws attention to several characteristics of the rule of faith. First, it is not self-sufficient; it prompts questions and deeper inquiry (how do you understand . . . ? what does it mean . . . ?) Second, it encourages personal appropriation (what comfort . . . ? what difference . . . ?) Third, it enables distinctly contextual inquiry (language for God, faith and science, ecology). Fourth, it places faith and inquiry within the community (only as an individual? image of God). Catechisms also go beyond the explicit affirmations of the creed to explore Scripture, sacraments, and other matters of Christian faith and life. The point is that attention to "the essence of the rule" guides rather than restricts the church's discussion, and may even soothe its "itching curiosity."

The church's conversation about the faith is not confined to direct discussion of the rule of faith in the Creeds, of course. Throughout the church's life there have been times and places when articulation of the faith was important to the community's faithfulness: "In every age, the church has expressed its witness in words and deeds as the need of the time required."⁸ Reformed Christians in particular have stressed the necessity of confession *in loco* and *in tempore*. These confessional articulations are self-conscious

amplifications of the rule of faith, however, not substitutions for it. Thus the Westminster Confession of Faith: “all synods or councils . . . may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both.”⁹

It is important to remember that the *regula fidei* is a summary of the scriptural story, and that confessions seek to be faithful to Scripture. Both the rule of faith and the confessions of the church are reliable guides to the reading of Scripture, and thus reliable witnesses to the gospel. Heinrich Bullinger’s statement at the signing of the First Helvetic Confession is instructive:

We wish in no way to prescribe for all churches through these articles a single rule of faith. For we acknowledge no other rule of faith than Holy Scripture. . . . We grant to everyone the freedom to use his own expressions which are suitable for his church and will make use of this freedom ourselves, at the same time defending the true sense of this Confession against distortions.¹⁰

Bullinger reminds us of the Reformed insistence that Scripture is the “only rule of faith and obedience,” but it is precisely from summaries of Scripture’s narrative that the *regula fidei* developed, and it is precisely as originating articulations of the *regula fidei* that the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds come to us as our rule of faith. Thus, the rule of faith governs our explorations of faith and faithfulness. The adopted confessions and catechisms of our churches are expressions of a continuing ecclesial discussion that does not disturb the essence of the rule of faith. In turn, the confessional core provides “authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do.” Thus, we are to be instructed, guided, and led by confessions shaped by the ecumenical creeds, the embodiment of the rule of faith.

Being instructed, being led, being guided by the primary articulation of the rule of faith in the ecumenical creeds is not a retreat into effortless simplicity of faith. Luke Timothy Johnson puts the matter well:

I think that the Christian creed enunciates a powerful and provocative understanding of the world, one that ought to scandalize a world that runs on the accepted truths of Modernity. There is something in the creed to offend virtually every contemporary sensibility. At the same time, it communicates a compelling vision of the world’s destiny and humanity’s role that challenges the accustomed idolatries and the weary platitudes of current worldly wisdom. Christians who say these words should know what they are doing when they say them and what they are saying when they mean them. This is the precondition to their celebrating a specifically Christian conception of reality, and the presupposition for their challenging the dominant conceptions of the world where they should be challenged.¹¹

We live in a time (and in a church) that is not attracted to “rules,” and certainly not to a rule of *faith*. Diversity is the church’s prized attribute, and we seem committed to celebrating a myriad of “specifically personal conceptions of reality.” The character of

our ecclesial era (and its distance from previous eras) can be gauged by our reaction to an expression of theological obedience to the voice of the church:

Once the church has spoken authoritatively on, let us say, what it considers to be legitimate Protestant doctrine, then I as a theologian – and every Protestant Christian is a theologian! – have only a relative freedom with respect to this matter, within the framework of what the church has declared; or, conversely, I am relatively bound with respect to my thoughts on theology, my creed, and so on. I owe relative obedience to the church; it has the right to demand a *sacrificium intellectus*, and on occasion perhaps even a *sacrificium conscientiae*.

Sacrificing anything in obedience to the church – much less beliefs and morality – is not congenial to modern thinking. The sentiment seems more like Benedict XVI than its actual author: Dietrich Bonhoeffer!¹² Yet we are not independent agents. Because theologians and preachers exercise their offices within the church's ministry; their first responsibility is not to articulate their own thoughts, but to listen to the church's voice, the chorus sung by generations who have lived and died the faith before us.

There have been times in the church's life when oppressive orthodoxy was a painful problem. Ours is not one of those times. Our problem is a *laissez faire* approach to dogma that produces ecclesial cacophony. The solution does not lie in a revival of oppressive orthodoxy, but in a fitting reception of the rule of faith coupled with suitable conversation about unsettled or ambiguous matters. The *regula fidei* does not squelch theological exploration in the church, but rather enables it. The genuinely conversational character of both theology and proclamation is made possible by a shared language and its shared grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. Colin Gunton – theologian and avid gardener – provides an apt metaphor for the task of theologians and preachers:

. . . so far as the relations of dogma to theology are concerned, dogma is that which delimits the garden of theology, providing a space in which theologians may play freely and cultivate such plants as are cultivable in the space which is so defined. . . . But the general point is that just as a garden is not a garden without some boundaries . . . so theology ceases to be Christian theology if it effectively ceases to remain true to its boundaries.¹³

Theology's passive voice acknowledges that God is the Subject and we the object of God's gracious Way in the world. It also acknowledges that church's rule of faith – developed by men and women who lived and died the faith in the centuries of the church's formation – governs our own theology and proclamation. Far from being weak and indefinite, theology's passive voice is clear and vigorous testimony to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

NOTES

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis battles, trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 4.1.4., p. 1016.

² Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, in *Early Christian Fathers*, Cyril C. Richardson, ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953) 1.10.2., p. 360.

³ Tertullian, *Prescriptions Against Heretics*, in *Early Latin Theology*, S.L. Greenslade, ed. & trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956) 13, p. 39f.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14, p. 40.

⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.18., p. 527.

⁶ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Order* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2005) G-2.0300.

⁷ In contrast to the Lutheran pattern: Ten Commandments, Creed, Lord's Prayer (see Luther's Small catechism).

⁸ "The Confession of 1967," in Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 1966) 9.02.

⁹ "The Westminster Confession of Faith," *The Book of Confessions* 6.175.

¹⁰ Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1877), 1:389-390.

¹¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), p. 7.

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, volume 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

¹³ Colin Gunton, *Intellect and Action* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000) p. 1.