

CONFESSION & COVENANT (1)

Confession of Faith

A. Introduction

1. There are three documents that every local church needs.

One that explains what the church believes.

One that explains how the church lives.

One that explains how the church runs.

2. These documents are referred to as the 'Confession of Faith', the 'Church Covenant', and the 'Constitution of the Church'.

What are they?

Why are they needed?

What should be in them?

The first document we are going to consider is the Confession of Faith (sometimes known as a Statement of Faith) which explains what the church believes.

B. What is a Confession of Faith?

1. A Confession of Faith is a summary of what the church (its members) believes the Bible teaches.

It is the King of documents that a church needs.

2. A Confession of Faith is something which God's people have always had.

In the Old Testament, Israel confessed what they believed with the words of the Shema.

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." (Deuteronomy 6:4)

In the New Testament there appear to have arisen, even during the time of the apostles', short statements about what they believed.

"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." (1 Timothy 1:15)

"Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task." (1 Timothy 3:1)

"For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance." (1 Timothy 4:8-9)

"Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself." (2 Timothy 2:11-13)

"At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying." (Titus 3:3-8)

The Early Church had the Apostles' Creed which summed up what Christians believed.

"Do you believe in God the Father, Ruler of all? Do you believe in Christ Jesus, God's Son, who was born by the Holy Spirit through the virgin Mary, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, died and was buried, and rose again on the third day, alive from the dead, and ascended into heaven, sat at the Father's right hand, and will come again to judge the living and the dead? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy church, and the resurrection of the flesh?" (Apostolike Paradosis)

The Imperial Church, after controversies to do with the person of Christ adopted the Nicene Creeds (AD325, 381) and the Chalcedonian Creed (AD451).

After the Reformation, a number of new statements of Protestant belief appeared: the Lutherans had The Augsburg Confession (1530); the Presbyterians had The Westminster Confession of Faith (1546); the Anglicans had The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (1571); the Congregationalists had The Savoy Declaration (1658); and the Baptists had The Second London Confession (1689). These documents whilst agreeing on the gospel, spelled out key differences over church structure and baptism.

C. Why do we need a Confession of Faith?

1. Having a confession of faith is not only biblical (as the Old and New Testament references above show), it is also beneficial.

"This ancient document is a most excellent epitome of the things most surely believed among us... This little volume is not issued as an authoritative rule, or code of faith, whereby you are to be fettered, but as an assistance to you in controversy, a confirmation in faith, and a means of edification in righteousness..." (Charles Spurgeon)

2. What are some of the benefits?

It's beneficial for evangelism – it is a way of being honest and transparent about what we believe so that we do not mislead guests.

"Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

It's beneficial for teaching – it is a tool for discipling new Christians and instructing them about what a Christian believes.

It's beneficial for church membership – it makes clear to those wishing to join the church what beliefs they must be in full agreement with.

It's beneficial for ongoing unity within the church – these are non-negotiable truths that we are all agreed on.

"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 15:5-6)

"I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought." (1 Corinthians 1:10)

"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:3)

"If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose." (Philippians 2:1-2)

It's beneficial for church discipline – if someone no longer believes in one or more of the items on the Confession of Faith a process of warning and discipline must begin.

“If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.” (1 John 1:6)

It’s beneficial for guarding the gospel – it lets us know what the truth we are to defend is.

“What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.” (2 Timothy 1:13)

“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.” (Philippians 1:27)

“Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.” (Jude 3)

It’s beneficial for helping members spot false teaching and for correcting any false beliefs – if we hear a sermon or interpret a passage of the Bible in a way that goes against what is found in the Confession it should set alarm bells ringing. [A Confession of Faith works well as a shepherd’s crook for smacking wolves and bringing sheep into line!]

“Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.” (Ephesians 4:14)

It’s beneficial for appointing leaders – as the primary teachers and preachers of the church what they believe matters.

“He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.” (Titus 1:9)

It’s beneficial for deciding which other local churches we can partner with in gospel work.

D. What should be in a Confession of Faith?

1. What should be in a Confession of Faith is really determined by another question, which is, “How much do members need to agree on?”

The longer the Confession of Faith, the more agreement that is required of church members.

2. What should be in a Confession of Faith?¹

Truths that proclaim and protect the WHAT of the gospel – Truths concerning the Nature of God and the Trinity, humanity and the fall, Christ’s person, Christ’s work, the Spirit’s person and work, repentance and faith, sanctification and perseverance, Christ’s return and final judgment.

Truths that proclaim and protect the WHO of the gospel – Truths concerning who is part of the church and who is not part of the church.

3. What should not be in a Confession of Faith?

Truths that are so-called disputable matters – literal 6-day creation, particular atonement, Sabbatarian view of the Lord’s Day, Millennium, drinking alcohol and other matters of Christian freedom.

“Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.” (Romans 14:1)

4. Why don’t we use one of the historic Confessions of Faith?

¹ Jonathan Leeman, Confessions: Thick or Thin?

Whilst we want to affirm that we hold to the historic biblical truths of Christianity, as found in these older Confessions of Faith, there are two good reasons for using one which is newer.

It is readable – many of the older confessions use archaic or technical language.

It is relevant – by which I mean, it addresses new questions from our ever-changing culture, that were not being asked or were not considered controversial issues when the past confessions and creeds were written.

E. What is our Confession of Faith?

1. As a local church we have adopted as our Confession of Faith the Doctrinal Basis of the FIEC.

We also hold to additional statements the FIEC has produced on Gospel Unity, Women in Ministry, and Same Sex Marriage which clarify what we believe about current issues causing controversy within the UK church and culture.

2. At the same time we want to affirm our unity and continuity with the church throughout the ages who have confessed the same faith we do.

One way in which we have done this is by publicly professing our faith using one of the historic creeds during our services.