

CONFESSION & COVENANT (3)

The Constitution of the Church

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 third and final document we are going to consider is the Constitution of the Church which explains how the church runs.

B. What is the Church Constitution?

1. The Constitution of the Church is a document that explains how the church runs.

It is the Prince of documents that a church needs.

It defines how things get done and who can do it.

2. A Church Constitution is not only essential if the church is to run smoothly, it is also biblical for a church to have one.

Really?

Yes. The Lord Jesus tells us how His church should be organised and structured in His Word.

3. In Matthew's Gospel we see Jesus organising His church.

He makes clear who is part of His church and who is not.

"When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." (Matthew 16:13-18)

He gives authority to the church to identify and affirm who is and who is not part of the church.

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:19)

He outlines what is to happen when there are disputes between members and when a member stops living like one of His followers.

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." (Matthew 18:15-20)

He tells the church what it is to be doing as they wait for Him to return.

"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)

4. Elsewhere in the Bible, He gives further instructions for how things are to be done in His church.

He says that each local church should be led by a plurality of elders, chosen or affirmed by the congregation (they should be independent churches).

"The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you." (Titus 1:5)

"Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." This proposal pleased the whole group... They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them." (Acts 6:3-4, 6)

He gives clear commands about who can be an elders and what the elders are to do and how they are to do it.

"Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap." (1 Timothy 3:1-7)

"An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless – not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. 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 1:6-9)

"Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching." (1 Timothy 4:13)

"The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching." (1 Timothy 5:17)

"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!" (Acts 20:28-31)

“Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being example to the flock.” (1 Peter 5:2-3)

“Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands.” (1 Timothy 5:22)

5. All these instructions Jesus gives, whilst clear are more general rather than specific.

So a local church will need a document that explains precisely how they will seek to faithfully carry out these instructions, which is what the Church Constitution is.

C. Why do we need a Church Constitution?

1. It is a legal requirement.

As a registered UK charity we are required to have a constitution.

2. But even if it wasn’t a legal requirement, there are a number good reasons why it is good for a local church to have a Church Constitution.

It is beneficial for maintaining order – a constitution gives clarity about the different responsibilities that members of the church have.

“But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.” (1 Corinthians 14:40)

It is beneficial for evangelism – in a culture suspicious of churches (because of scandals of leadership abuse and mishandling of funds), a constitution offers some measure of protection.

“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” (Matthew 10:16)

It is beneficial for church membership – a constitution makes clear to those wishing to join the church how things get done.

It is beneficial for church discipline – a constitution outlines a clear process for the discipline of elders and members who no longer hold to the Confession of Faith and live according to the Church Covenant.

“Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.” (1 Timothy 5:19)

“Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him.” (Titus 3:10)

It is beneficial for appointing leaders – a constitution makes clear who can be an elder and what the process of affirming them to serve in this role is.

D. What should be in a Church Constitution?

1. The Church Constitution, in addition to including all the matters required for charities, needs to explain precisely how it will seek to faithfully carry out Christ’s instructions about how His church should be organised.

This will include:

What the purpose or mission of the local church is.

What the local church believes [Confession of Faith].

Who leads the church under Christ.

Who can be an elder. How are they chosen and appointed. What their responsibilities are.

The process of setting aside and supporting an elder to serve full time (as pastor).

Who can be a member. How someone is accepted into membership. What their responsibilities are [Church Covenant].

How decisions are made and by whom.

What the process for removing an elder or church member is.

How finances are handled and used.

2. By limiting the Church Constitution to matters concerning how the church runs, it prevents the document from becoming too cluttered.

But it also means that the church will require other documents such as a Safeguarding / Child Protection Policy, a Health and Safety Policy, and increasingly a Marriage Policy.

3. Church Documents that are clear and most importantly biblical, are a great gift to local churches to help them be healthy and as Jesus intends them to be.