



The uses of 'confessions of faith'¹

1. A confession is a useful means for the public affirmation and defence of truth

The church is to '*hold fast the form of sound words*' (2 Timothy 1:13), to '*contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*' (Jude 3), and '*to stand fast with one spirit, with one soul striving for the faith of the gospel*' (Philippians 1:27). In the fulfilment of this task, a confession is a useful tool for discriminating truth from error and for presenting in a small compass the central doctrines of the Bible in their integrity and due proportions.

First, creedal formulation is part of the public teaching task of the church. A confession of faith is a public definition to those outside of our congregations of the central issues of our faith, a testimony to the world as to the faith which we hold in distinction from others.

Second, a confession of faith is a helpful instrument in the public instruction of the congregation. A confession is a body of divinity in small compass which can be used to give our people a broad exposure to truth, as well as a hedge against error. It greatly facilitates the promotion of Christian knowledge and a discriminating faith² among the people of God and among others who attend upon the public ministry of our churches, as well as being a useful aid to the people of God in the instruction of their children. Moreover, a confession of faith serves as a framework within which our people can knowledgeably receive the preaching of the Word, as well as framework which alerts them to novelty and error, wherever they encounter it.

2. A confession serves as a public standard of fellowship and discipline

The Bible envisages the local church not as a union of those who have agreed to differ but as a body marked by peace and by unity. The church is to '*keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*' (Ephesians 4:3). Its members are to be '*of one accord*', i.e., one in heart, soul, spirit, mind and voice (Romans 15:5-6; 1 Corinthians 1:10; Philippians 1:27; 2:2). A confession aids in the protection of a church's unity and in the preservation of its peace. It serves as a basis of ecclesiastical fellowship among those so nearly agreed as to be able to walk and labour together in harmony. It draws together those who hold a common faith and binds them together in one communion.

Jesus said, '*Every house divided against itself cannot stand*' (Matthew 12:25). Can Calvinists, Arminians, Pelagians, and Unitarians pray, labour, have fellowship and worship together peacefully and profitably, while each maintains and promotes his own notions of truth? Who will lead in worship or preach? Can those who believe Jesus to be God pray with those who regard such worship as idolatry? Can those who profess to be justified by faith in Christ alone commune with those who believe otherwise? Can they sit together at the same sacramental table? Can those who believe in verbal and plenary inspiration share the pulpit with those who deny that doctrine? The only way that those who differ on essential matters can live together in harmony is to call a moratorium on truth; otherwise, they will indeed '*make the house of God a miserable Babel*'.³

As noted earlier, all churches have a creed, either written or understood by its members. And every wise man, before joining, will desire to know what that creed is. He has a right to know what the church believes and the church has a right to know what he believes. Now, to have an unpublished creed as a test of fellowship is disorderly, if not dishonest. Each man is left to discover the creed of the church for himself. And the church itself has no easy way to discern if those who apply for membership are in harmony with the common faith of its members, since the essentials of their common faith are nowhere particularised. A published confession greatly facilitates the evaluation of the doctrinal position of the church by a prospective member, and *vice versa*.

A published confession of faith also provides a concise doctrinal standard for use in church discipline. We are to *'mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and turn away from them'* (Romans 16:17). We are to cut off those who trouble the peace of the church by false doctrine: *'a man that is a heretic after the first and second admonition reject'* (Titus 3:10). In order to fulfill its role in guarding the purity of its membership, the church must have a doctrinal standard, and that standard must be published openly, for men have a right to know by what particulars they will be judged. To require the church to exercise discipline against doctrinal error without a published confession of faith is to require it to make bricks without straw.

Nothing short of a confession of faith will satisfy the legitimate claims of a church and its members on one another. As James Bannerman observed

*, 'It is the duty of the Church ... by some formal and public declaration of its own faith, to give assurance to its members of the soundness of its profession, and to receive assurance of theirs.'*⁴

A church without a confession of faith may as well advertise that it is prepared to be a harbour for every kind of damning heresy and to be the soil for any who are given to growing the crop of novelty. A church without a confession of faith has the theological and ecclesiastical equivalent of AIDS, with no immunity against the infectious winds of false doctrine.

And what is true of life within the church is also true of fellowship between local churches. What church, which values the preservation of its own doctrinal purity, as well as its own peace and unity, could safely have fellowship with another body, knowing nothing of its stand on matters of truth and error? With no defined faith or polity, such a non-confessional church might be a source of pollution instead of edification. Under such circumstances, we could not open our pulpits or encourage fellowship among the congregations with a clear conscience.⁵

Before leaving the subject of creeds as standards of fellowship and discipline, a word needs to be said lest some conclude that we are saying that every member must have advanced views of Bible doctrine in order to gain and to maintain membership of a confessional church. Note the observation of Andrew Fuller:

*If a religious community agrees to specify some leading principles which they consider as derived from the Word of God, and judge the belief of them to be necessary in order to any person's becoming or continuing a member with them, it does not follow that those principles should be equally understood, or that all their brethren must have the same degree of knowledge, nor yet that they should understand and believe nothing else. The powers and capacities of different persons are various; one may comprehend more of the same truth than another, and have his views more enlarged by an exceedingly great variety of kindred ideas; and yet the substance of their belief may still be the same. The object of articles (of faith) is to keep at a distance, not those who are weak in the faith, but such as are its avowed enemies.'*⁶

3. A creed serves as a concise standard by which to evaluate ministers of the Word

The minister of the Word is to be a *'faithful man'* (2 Timothy 2:2), *'holding to the faithful word which is according to the teaching ... able to exhort in the sound doctrine'* (Titus 1:9). We are to be on guard against false prophets and apostles. We are to *'try the spirits, whether they are of God'* (1 John 4:1). We are not to receive an unfaithful man into our homes or to extend to him a brotherly greeting, lest we become partakers in his evil works (2 John 10).

We cannot obey these admonitions simply by receiving the confession that a man believes the Bible. We must know what he believes the Bible teaches on the great issues. A confession of faith makes it relatively simple for the church to inquire about a man's doctrinal soundness over the broad field of biblical truth. Without a confession of faith the church's evaluation of its ministers is haphazard and shallow at best; and the church will be in great danger of laying hands on novices

and heretics, because it does not measure candidates for the ministry by a broad and deep standard.

And what is true in the church's recognition of its ministers is doubly true when recognising professors set aside to train men for the ministry. One cannot over-estimate the damage done to the churches by carelessness in placing men in theological chairs and in giving them the opportunity to shape the malleable minds and souls of young ministerial candidates.

4. Confessions contribute to a sense of historical continuity

How do we know that we and our people are not an historical anomaly, that we are not the only ones in history who have believed this way? Our confessions tie us to a precious heritage of faith received from the past and are a legacy by which we may pass on to our children the faith of their fathers. This, of course, is no minor issue. A sense of historical continuity greatly contributes to the stability of a church and to the personal spiritual well-being of its members.

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¹ This article originally formed part of a longer paper entitled *The Legitimacy and Use of Confessions*.

² John Murray observed: 'In many circles today there is the tendency to depreciate, if not deplore, the finesse of theological definition which the Confession exemplifies. This is an attitude to be deprecated. A growing faith grounded in the perfection and finality of Scripture requires increasing particularity and cannot consist with the generalities that make room for error.' *Collected Writings*, 1:317.

³ See *The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions*, Samuel Miller, Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1839; reprint ed. Greenville, S.C.: A. Press, 1987.

⁴ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (reprint ed., London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 1:296.

⁵ Where we discover that there is not absolute agreement between our confessions, at least we are able to have fellowship with our eyes wide open to those perspectives which divide us.

⁶ Fuller, *Complete Works*, 5:222.