

# GOSPEL HIGHWAY

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## The Legitimacy Of Using The Confession Of Faith

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A recovery of the Reformed Faith began in the 1960s in UK and America. It spread world-wide so that today there is a Reformed movement in many parts of the world. Older churches were revived, and newer churches have been planted. The Reformed churches are known for their emphasis on the authority of Scripture, the sovereignty of God, the Calvinistic system of salvation, the centrality of the local church, and the primacy of preaching. Another characteristic of the churches that are Reformed is their adherence to one of the confessions of faith that arose from the Reformation. In conjunction with adherence to a confession of faith, the Reformed churches frequently use catechisms to teach doctrine. Catechising is a time-tested method of instruction used in the Christian church, but it is largely unknown among the modern evangelical churches.

Reformed churches are credal, believing in the legitimacy of setting forth their belief in a systematic way in documents which they call the confessions of faith. They stand in contrast to the many evangelical churches that are unsympathetic to any creed or statement of faith. In fact, there are many modern evangelicals who are antagonistic to any form of credal Christianity. Their battle cry is “No creed but the Bible alone”. They convey the impression that they have a concern to uphold the sole authority of Scripture, and imply that we, who are Reformed, are inconsistent in championing the sole authority of Scripture because we are introducing another source of authority next to the Bible.

So widespread is this anti-creedal sentiment that many unthinking Christians have been adversely influenced. They look upon Reformed people as queer and narrow-minded. Upon exposure to the Reformed faith, a number of them have become convinced of the truth. But they are still beset with the difficulty of reconciling the emphasis on the sole authority of Scripture, championed by Reformed people, and their adherence to the confession of faith. To their mind, the belief in the sole authority of Scripture automatically rules out any place for the confession of faith. Indeed, there are those who are prepared to call themselves Reformed but are reluctant to place any importance upon the confession of faith.

It seems right, therefore, that we should defend the legitimacy of using the confession of faith. This has been done by more able people before this. The need of the times, however, require that we continue to sound forth what we believe so that truth will finally prevail. We wish to help the struggling individuals to come all the way with us. We wish to strengthen those who are already with us so that they may be firmly established in the belief in the legitimacy of using the confession of faith.

### I. Definitions

To help in our deliberation, we must clarify some terms and make some definitions. We all know that words can be used in the general sense, and they can also be used in the technical sense - they can be generic or specific. In books and articles, you often find all three terms “creed”, “statement of faith”, and “confession of faith” used interchangeably to refer to the written beliefs of the church. I prefer to be more precise and will be using these terms in their specific senses, unless the context show otherwise.

By “*creeds*” I refer to the brief statements of faith drawn up by the early church to counter particular errors or heresies. Three well known creeds handed down to us are the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. The Apostles’ Creed seemed to have been drawn up in the eighth century to counter Gnosticism and Docetism. The Nicene Creed was drawn up in AD 325 to counter Arianism. The Athanasian Creed is commonly thought to have been produced in the fourth or fifth century. As a more direct statement on the Trinity it became a test of the orthodoxy and competence of the clergy. All three creeds were valued highly by the Reformers. These creeds are accepted, or acceptable, to all the orthodox churches and all Protestant and evangelical churches today.

By “*confessions of faith*” I refer to the fuller statements of belief drawn up during and after the Reformation. By that time, the orthodox churches - including the Roman Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Egyptian Coptic, and Mar Thoma churches - have gone astray in many areas, including the doctrine of salvation and the manner of worship. During the Reformation, the Protestant churches found it necessary to distance themselves from these orthodox churches, and the Roman Catholic Church in particular. They also had to contend with Pelagianism and Socinianism. There were also differences on baptism, the Lord’s supper, the form of church government, and a host of other issues. The confessions of faith drawn up during the Reformation and Puritan age were therefore more comprehensive, covering systematically the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith.

By “*statements of faith*” I refer to the short statements drawn up by various evangelical churches in more recent years. Like the creeds of the early church, and unlike the confessions of faith of the Reformation, they are brief. Unlike the creeds of the early church, and like the confessions of faith of the Reformation, they cover a wide spectrum of doctrines. A typical statement of faith will include articles on the Scripture, the Godhead, salvation, sanctification, the church, the ordinances, and the future. The value of statements of faith is that they show in small compass the belief of the church so that a visitor may know that he is worshipping in a true church. The disadvantage is that they leave out too much so that it is impossible to judge the church on those areas that its statement of faith is silent about.

## II. Legitimacy

We are now ready to consider the legitimacy of using the confession of faith. We need to note that the legitimacy, or rightness, of using the confession is different from the value of using it, although they overlap. We wish to consider why it is legitimate, or right, to use the confession. We will consider the value of using the confession after that.

There are two key passages of Scripture on which I base my arguments. The first is 1 Timothy 3:15, which says, “...but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.” Here, the local church is regarded as the pillar and ground of the truth. The church has two basic responsibilities, the first of which is to hold up the truth like a pillar holding up the roof of a house. This speaks of the proclamational task of the church. When the truth is proclaimed, its light will shine far into the spiritual darkness of this world. Ignorance will be dispelled, doubts will be cleared, hearts will be convicted, and sinners will be drawn to faith in Christ. The second basic responsibility of the church is to act as the foundation of the truth. This speaks of the didactic task of the church. Once the gospel has brought about faith in the hearers, the whole counsel of God’s word must be taught to them. Believers must grow in knowledge, in Christian graces, and in usefulness in the Lord’s service.

The second passage to consider is Jude 3, which says. “Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” Three points may be noted from this passage. Firstly, there is such a thing as “the faith” - the definite article is in the original Greek text. It is a definite faith, a definable faith, and not a vague, nebulous type of faith that has been handed down to us. Secondly, this definite and definable faith was “once for all delivered to the saints”, which means that it has to be handed down to the subsequent generations of believers. We

have a duty to pass on the faith to the future generations in such a way that the faith is not altered or adulterated. Thirdly, the faith must be contended for - and that earnestly, and not in a half-hearted way. In the original Greek, “to contend” is one word (epagonizesthai) which carries the idea of fighting and struggling against the enemies of the truth in order to preserve, uphold, and propagate it.

From these two key passages, we may draw out the following implications:

First, it is the duty of the church *to know, and define, the truth*. If the church does not know the truth, how can it teach it to others? If the truth cannot be clearly defined, how are the hearers to act? If the truth is not clearly stated, how are we to know what constitutes truth and what constitutes error? The trumpet that gives an unclear sound will not summon any one to battle. This is the first warrant for the confession of faith. Truth must be defined, which in practice means writing it down precisely, concisely, and comprehensively. When that is done, we have a confession of faith!

Second, it is the duty of the church *to propagate the truth*. The gospel must be preached. The whole counsel of God’s word must be taught. Faithful churches must be planted. The Great Commission is not an option but an imperative. What is the content of the gospel that we preach? What constitutes the whole counsel of God’s word upon which we must establish the faith of believers? What sort of churches do we plant if we are not sure of the body of truth that constitutes “the faith”? The duty to propagate the truth is the second warrant for the confession of faith. Imagine sending your son out on an errand without spelling out clearly what he is expected to do. It will be like asking him to make bricks without giving him straw. This is exactly what happens when a church engages in preaching a message that it cannot clearly define. On the other hand, when we define the message that is preached to sinners, and that is taught to believers, and on which churches are founded, we straightway have a confession of faith.

Third, it is the duty of the church *to remain faithful*. Contrary to popular belief, faithfulness is not defined by the number of church members, nor by mere activity and enterprise. Instead, faithfulness is defined by doctrine and practice, in that number and in that order. Doctrine must come first, then practice. Without correct doctrine, there can be no correct practice. Correct doctrine alone does not make a church faithful, but obedience to the truth does. If Christians are to contend for the faith, they must themselves be faithful to that faith. In the second and third chapters of the book of Revelation, the churches that are not faithful in doctrine or practice are warned by the Lord and commanded to repent. It is not good enough to claim that you are correct on just a few main points, or even on most of the points of doctrine. We want to be correct in all points of doctrine, as far as is possible. The duty to remain faithful constitutes the third warrant for drawing up a confession of faith.

Fourth, it is the duty of the church *to defend the faith*. Physical attacks upon the church from without is hard to bear, but it has the effect of cleansing the church. Doctrinal attacks from within the church is quiet and subtle, but it has the effect of destroying the whole church. The enemies of the gospel know that the more effective way to accomplish their objective is to infiltrate the church to bring about a slow but sure death. The apostle Paul warned the Ephesian elders of this danger in Acts 20:29-30, saying, “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.” In his book “Doctrinal Integrity”, Samuel Miller gave an interesting description of how the Council of Nicea attempted to ferret out the heresy of Arius on the divinity of Christ. Arius professed to believe in all that the Bible teaches about Christ, and was willing to accept all the language of the Bible concerning the person and nature of Christ. The Council finally formulated in their own language what they believed to be the doctrine of Scripture on the divinity of Christ. Arius and his disciples refused to subscribe to the statement drawn up by the Council, so that it was discovered that all the while Arius held to a different understanding of the Scripture on the subject. That was a classic example of the necessity and value of a confession of faith. Imagine sending out soldiers to fight who are unable to distinguish the enemies from the friends! It is impossible to defend the faith without knowing and stating exactly what constitutes the faith.

The fifth and final point is that the church has a duty *to pass down the faith*. Here, we are referring to the passing on of the faith to the future generation. It is an accepted fact of life that we

learn from those who are more knowledgeable than us so that we, in turn, can contribute to the knowledge. The source of our knowledge of God and His will is the Bible. The Bible is the complete and sufficient revelation of God to us. What we know from the Bible must be passed on to the future generations so that they, in turn, can study deeper into the Bible and pass on the faith. Since the confession of faith consists of doctrines laid out systematically in a concise and precise manner, it is the best “frame of reference” for studying the Bible. It is not as thick and unwieldy as a tome on systematic theology. It is not filled with discussions on disputable details. It only contains the fundamentals of the faith delineated with clarity.

We have covered five reasons why it is right to use the confession of faith. It is legitimate to use the confession of faith because: (i) the church has a duty to know and define the truth; (ii) the church has a duty to propagate the truth; (iii) the church has a duty to remain faithful to God; (iv) the church has a duty to defend the faith; and (v) the church has a duty to pass down the faith.

### III. Value

We come now to consider the value of using the confession of faith. As mentioned already, the value of using the confession overlaps with the legitimacy of its use. Here, we will mention five specific advantages of using the confession of faith.

First, the confession of faith is a useful tool *for preparing believers for church membership*. The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith consists of 32 chapters. We have been able to study two chapters in a half-an-hour session each week, so that the whole confession is covered within four months. An alternative approach which takes less time is to assign the prospective member to read through the confession of faith, after which one or two sessions can be held to discuss any points that are in doubt. We have made it a practice to study through the confession of faith in pioneering situations to prepare the believers for covenanting together as a church.

Second, the confession of faith is a useful standard *for maintaining the unity and purity of the church*. Membership in a church is a voluntary matter in which there is mutual agreement between the parties concerned to uphold the rules and regulations, as well as the belief, of the church. When any member departs from the doctrines set forth in the doctrinal standard, he is obliged to resign from membership after all due attempts have been made to sort out the difference. He may then join himself to another church that holds to doctrines that best accord with his new belief. The member should not insist on staying on as a member to stir up strife over his difference in doctrine, nor should he bear with the difference such that his conscience, or that of the members of the church, is hurt. In many situations, the person need only resign from membership while continuing to worship together with the church, until a better arrangement can be made.

Third, the confession of faith is a useful standard by which *to determine the suitability of candidates for the ministry*. Each local church has the right to determine who should be its pastor, just as each family has the right to determine who to take in as a lodger. A church will have not much problem with one from its own membership who is being considered for the ministry, but difficulty will arise if the candidate is from another church. Apart from matters of character and gifts, the candidate must be examined with regard to his belief to ensure that he upholds the doctrinal standard of the church.

Fourth, the confession of faith is useful *in determining the degree of fellowship we can have with another church or preacher*. We have to engage in selective fellowship because of limited time, resources, and opportunities. Furthermore, in a highly mobile age like ours, preachers often pass our way and seek opportunities to preach. It helps to know that the church or preacher professes adherence to one of the confessions of faith of the Reformation, although that is still no guarantee that he is truly sound in doctrine or safe in character and behaviour. Of course, we will be overjoyed to know a preacher or a church that holds to the same belief and practice as we do.

Fifth, the confession of faith *gives a sense of purpose and historical continuity to the church*. It has been our practice to avoid planting a church too near to another Reformed church, out

of deference to it. We will certainly not plant a church right next door to a Reformed Baptist church. We are not in the business of competing with other churches, much less to engage in rivalry with a like-minded church. Our primary concern is to carry out the Great Commission - to preach the gospel so that souls will be saved. However, on some occasions we find ourselves planting a church where there are other churches already. The question may be asked, "How do we justify such a move?" Our answer is twofold. Firstly, the need for the gospel in that place is great, for the combined effort of all the churches there has hardly reached to ten percent of the population. You will find that that is true in nearly every such situation. Secondly, we believe it is justifiable to provide an alternative to the teaching given by the other non-Reformed churches. As we are able, we will interact with the other churches to help them come to a better understanding of the truth, but we must not be held back in the task of propagating what we believe to be the truth. Each church, and each Christian, will have to answer to the Lord on the last day. Our own church members know that we have close fellowship with other like-minded churches, and they know that we stand in a long line of believers who have held to the same truth in times past. Our fellowship with believers at the present, and in the past, is based on truth.

#### IV. Objections

Having covered the legitimacy and value of using the confession of faith, it is a small matter to counter the objections raised by our opponents. What are the common objections that have been raised against the use of the confession of faith? There are four.

First, it is claimed that the use of the confession of faith is *contrary to our belief in the sole authority of Scripture*. That is not the case, however, for anyone who cares to read our confession of faith will find it clearly affirming that Scripture alone is the authority in all matters of faith and practice. The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith opens with the this statement: "The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience" (1:1). It goes on to affirm that, "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture, to which nothing is to be added at any time, either by new revelation of the Spirit, or by the traditions of men" (1:6).

The confession of faith is certainly not a subordinate authority, much less is it another authority equal to Scripture. The Holy Scripture is our only authority. We do not use the confession of faith to interpret the Scripture. The confession is our interpretation of the Scripture. It is therefore the doctrinal standard of our church. Any apparent authority attached to the confession of faith is derived from the Scripture, since it contains the teaching of Scripture. Put another way, the confession of faith has no original authority, independent of Scripture.

This leads us to the second objection, which is that the use of the confession of faith is *against the liberty of conscience*. The claim is that we are making it obligatory to all who wish to join our church to subscribe to our interpretation of the Scripture. But that is not the case, for our confession of faith also affirms the belief in the liberty of conscience. It says, "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from all doctrines and commandments of men which are in any respect contrary to His word, or not contained in it" (21:2). We may teach and persuade people to consider becoming members of the church, but they must do it voluntarily. If they do not believe in the doctrines set forth in our confession of faith, we are not willing to accept them into membership. Just as we respect their right to act according to their belief, so too they must respect our right as a church to act according to our belief.

The third objection is that adherence to the confession of faith *stifles our understanding of the truth*. The claim is that we are hemmed in by the confession of faith so that we become narrow-minded and are no longer open to other views. Our answer is that the confession of faith has instilled in us a high regard for the Scripture and a strong desire to know more of the truth. As we are driven to study the Scripture, we become convinced all the more that the fundamentals of the faith as set forth in the confession are right, in contrast to the views propagated by others. We have never treated the confession of faith as sacrosanct, and acknowledge that in some points, there are genuine differences

of opinion. For example, among those who hold to the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, there is disagreement on whether the pope is the final antichrist or just a manifestation of the many antichrists who foreshadow the coming final one. There is also disagreement on whether all infants who die in infancy are elect, and therefore saved, or only the elect among the infants who die in infancy are saved. It may be observed that the champions of the faith - the great preachers, theologians, and missionaries - have come largely from the rank of those who hold to the confessions of faith.

The final objection is that adherence to the confession of faith tends to *stifle fellowship between churches*. It is claimed that Reformed people tend to keep to themselves, and are not at liberty to have fellowship with all and sundry. Our answer is that that is a matter of our choice. We are at liberty to choose who we have fellowship with, and the chief criterion for fellowship is agreement on the truth. The more truth we are agreed upon, the closer is our fellowship, and vice versa. We practise selective fellowship because, in obedience to the Lord, we cannot have fellowship with the purveyors of heresies and have to withdraw from brethren who erred from the truth. (See Romans 16:17-18; 2 John 7-11; and 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15.) This is not to say that we think ourselves to be the only true and faithful Christians around, for we do acknowledge that many Christians who differ from us often show a true love for the Lord and serve Him zealously. With such, we will have no difficulty in fellowship.

## V. Which Confession?

By this time, I hope you are convinced that it is legitimate, and to our advantage, to use the confession of faith. The final matter we wish to consider is which confession of faith we should adopt.

Reformed churches are realistic in their approach to this matter. It is not impossible to draw up a confession of faith that is totally new. However, the effort will be a colossal one, for the proposed confession of faith must be accurate and acceptable to all who are of like faith. It will be difficult to summon together enough like-minded and capable people to sit at conference for a sustained period, to thoroughly accomplish the task from scratch. In the providence of God, the Reformation took place with the result that a number of good confessions of faith have been drawn up. The men involved in drawing up the confessions were eminently qualified in terms of scholarship, piety, and experience. The confessions drawn up by them have been tested and tried through the centuries. Why not use them instead of attempting to re-invent the wheel?

Let me briefly introduce to you some of these confessions of faith. Four well-known confessions of faith are the following:

*The Three Forms of Unity* (comprising the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort), which was drafted in 1561/63 and reaffirmed in 1618/19, is the confession of faith of many Reformed churches on the continent of Europe, and of their offspring in America and other parts of the world.

*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, produced by the Westminster divines in Britain in 1647, is adopted by many Presbyterian churches throughout the world today.

*The Savoy Declaration of Faith*, produced in England in 1658, is the confession of faith of the Congregationalists.

*The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, produced anonymously by the persecuted Particular Baptists in Britain in 1677, and re-issued publicly in 1689, is today used by Reformed Baptists worldwide.

There are other confessions of faith that came from the Reformation, including *the Separatist Confession of 1596*, *the 1644 Confession of Faith of the Particular Baptists*, *the 1678 Orthodox Creed of the General Baptists*, and *the Forty-nine Articles of the Church of England*.

All these confessions of faith are Calvinistic in soteriology, except the Orthodox Creed of the

General Baptist, which is Arminian. They differ from one another mainly in the form of church government. The Forty-nine Articles of the Church of England is prelatical and Erastian - believing in an hierarchy of individuals ruling over the churches, with the queen (or king) as the governor (or head) of the church. The Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Confession of Faith advocate the Presbyterian form of church government, in which there is an hierarchy of committees ruling over the churches. The Savoy Declaration of Faith and the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith both advocate the Independent form of church government, in which the churches are autonomous - ruled by elders, with congregational consent. The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith differ from all the other confessions in that it upholds the baptism of believers by immersion.

Which of these should you adopt for your churches? That is for you to decide. You will need to come to your own conclusion on the differences reflected in the different confessions of faith. Here, we will practise true liberty of conscience, and mutually respect those who differ from us. I would only appeal to you to be absolutely honest in the study of these issues, and not be controlled by human traditions or personal prejudice.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion let us be reminded that the adoption a confession of faith is no indication that the church is faithful, neither is it a guarantee that it will not go astray. The Church of England, and many Presbyterian churches throughout the world, profess adherence to their respective confessions of faith, but do not truly value nor teach the truths contained in them. We do not regard such churches as truly Reformed. In order to be truly obedient to the Lord, and to avoid straying from the faith, we must embrace the confession of faith sincerely and put into practice its truths. We live in an age of doctrinal relativism, and it behoves those who love the truth to stand firm on the confession of faith. Indeed, we must not operate on the defensive, believing in the legitimacy and usefulness of the confession of faith, but rather, go on the offensive and show our opponents the imperative of being confessional in order to prove their fidelity to Scripture.

### **References:**

1. Doctrinal Integrity, by Samuel Miller, Presbyterian Heritage Publications (1989).
2. The Legitimacy and Use of Confessions, Robert Paul Martin, in A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, Evangelical Press (1989).

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