

An Introduction To The 1689 Confession (Jude 3-4, 20-23)

by BS Poh

o Jude's concern was for believers to contend earnestly for the faith and for their faith to be built up. This twofold purpose can be seen to underlie the history of the 1689 Confession of Faith.

I. Why we need the Confession of Faith

1. The Confession of Faith is a book of doctrine systematically arranged, in small compass.
 - Doctrine is important because: (a) the Bible is basically a book of doctrine; (b) God's people grow in the faith by doctrine (Acts 2:42; 1 Pet 2:2); (c) doctrine determines practice, both in the personal life and in the church.
 - A good Confession of Faith is useful for: (i) defining the beliefs of a local church; (ii) defending the church against wrong teaching.
2. A church that values the importance of doctrine should show it in two ways:
 - (i) Preaching and teaching God's word will be prominent in the life of the church.
 - (ii) A good Confession of Faith will be adopted as its doctrinal basis.
 - Of the two, the first is essential, the second highly desirable.
3. Isn't the Bible sufficient for the church? Isn't a simple Statement of Faith good enough?
 - To have a clearly defined body of truth is not a concept foreign to the Bible, e.g. Acts 2:42; Rom 16:17; Gal 1:6-9; 1 Cor 15:1; 2 Thess 3:6; 2 Tim 2:2; Tit 1:9; Jude 3.
 - A "Statement of Faith", of a few points of doctrine, is good enough to show that we are a true and evangelical church. However, it is too brief: (i) to counter errors; (ii) to define the doctrines held by the church.
 - The Confession of Faith is not a second, nor a secondary, source of authority next to the Bible. Rather, it defines the system of doctrine we believe is taught in the Bible. The Bible is our only authority in all matters of faith and practice.

II. History of the Confession of Faith

1. From Pentecost (30 AD) to Constantine (272-337 AD), the church expanded despite persecution.
 - For the next 1000 years, the Roman Catholic Church gained ascendancy, spreading superstition & human traditions.
 - In the 16th century, the Reformation recovered the central place of the Bible to Christians, and Protestant denominations were founded.
2. The Reformation, which began in Continental Europe, spread to England and Scotland.
 - In England, the state church was Anglican (Episcopal). In Scotland, the state church was Presbyterian.
 - The Independents (comprising the Congregationalists, General Baptists and Particular Baptists) multiplied in the 17th century.
 - The Independents (or Nonconformists) were persecuted by the state church up to 1640.

3. From 1640-1660, known as the period of the Commonwealth, Britain was ruled by Parliament and led for most of the time by Oliver Cromwell. This was a period of religious toleration.
 - The Particular Baptists produced their first Confession of Faith of 1644, consisting of 52 articles.
 - From 1643-1648, about 120 Christian leaders were summoned by Parliament to prepare the Westminster Confession of Faith for the whole nation, to replace Anglicanism. This did not take place for, in 1660, Charles II came to power and began another period of persecution against the Nonconformists. The Westminster Confession of Faith was adopted by the Presbyterian churches in Scotland.
4. From 1672, a measure of toleration was granted to Nonconformists.
 - The Particular Baptists met to produce their second and fuller Confession in 1677, based largely on the Westminster Confession, “to convince all that we have no itch to clogge Religion with new words, but do readily acquiesces in that form of sound words, which hath been in consent with the Holy Scripture, used by others before us.”
 - The Westminster Confession was Presbyterian - believing in rule by hierarchy of committees of church representatives, infant baptism, and mixed church membership of believers and unbelievers. The Particular Baptists differed on these issues.
5. A new era of liberty dawned in 1688. In 1689 thirty-seven leading Particular Baptist ministers re-issued their Confession, calling it “the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689”.
 - During the persecution in Britain in the 17th century, Christians emigrated to the Netherlands, and then to America. As America was opened up, more Christians emigrated there. In 1742, the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith was adopted by the Calvinistic Baptists of North America, and called the Philadelphia Confession of Faith.
6. In 1855, CH Spurgeon issued the 1689 Confession to strengthen the doctrinal position of the New Park Street Chapel in London, later known as the Metropolitan Tabernacle.
 - After Spurgeon, there was doctrinal decline on both sides of the Atlantic. Modernism (or Theological Liberalism) attacked the authority of Scripture and destroyed many denominations.
 - Arminianism gained the ascendancy, and “decisionism” (or “easy-believism”), altar calls, and man-centred religion took over.
 - Churches planted in other parts of the world by missionaries from Europe and America were largely Liberal and Arminian.
7. From 1958, there began a revival of interest in Reformed theology. Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones was mightily used of God to inspire men in UK and America to return to the old path.
 - The Baptists were among those affected by this revival of interest in Reformed theology. A spate of publication of the 1689 Confession followed.

III. Some Concluding Remarks

1. The 1689 Confession is the most mature of the Confessions of Faith that came out of the Reformation. Certain parts could have been better written, e.g. Chapter 20 on missions. However, it correctly expresses what we mean by “Reformed” and “Baptist”. It is not infallible. It is not our authority. It expresses the main doctrines of the Bible, which is our authority.
2. Evangelical churches that has come around to be Calvinistic and baptistic should have no problem using the 1689 Confession of Faith. It will be unwise to draw up a new confession of faith for ourselves. Why “reinvent the wheel”?
3. All believers will benefit from studying the 1689 Confession since it contains the main teaching of the Bible which are expressed systematically, concisely, and precisely.

Review Questions

1. State why doctrine is important and why the Confession of Faith is useful to the church.
2. How may we recognise a church that values the importance of doctrine?
3. State the relationship between the Confession of Faith and the Bible
4. What happened during the Reformation of the 16th century?
5. What church groups constituted the Independents of 17th century England?
6. When was the first Baptist Confession of Faith produced, and how many articles were in it?
7. When was the the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith produced, and when was it published?
8. What was the 1689 Confession of Faith called when adopted in North America in 1742?
9. Who issued the 1689 Confession in 1855 in London?
10. Who was greatly used by God in the revival of interest in Reformed theology in recent years?

Assignment/Discussion

What would you say to those who claim that, (i) “The whole Bible is our Confession of Faith”, or “Jesus Christ is our Creed”? (ii) “Confessions of Faith were drawn up by Western churches. We need to be indigenous churches, not western churches.”

Memory Passage (Jude 3, 20-23)

3 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.

20 But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, 21 keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. 22 And on some have compassion, making a distinction; 23 but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh.

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