



“What Is A Reformed Baptist Church?”

Study 6: The 1689 Confession Of Faith (Jude 3-4)

One characteristic of the Reformed is that they are confessional, i.e. they value and adopt a Confession of Faith for their churches. Both the General Baptists and the Particular Baptists arose during the same period and under the same circumstances. Both were confessional, with each producing Confessions of Faith of their own. With time, the General Baptists ceased being confessional so that today, the General Baptist churches would use much the adage, “No creed but the Bible”. The spiritual descendants of the Particular Baptists would call themselves Reformed Baptists, the majority of whom use the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, or “the 1689 Confession” in brief, as their doctrinal standard.

I. Attitudes To The Confession

1. Three attitudes are possible: (i) Favour and adopt as a doctrinal standard of the church; (ii) Indifference, seeing no need for it; (iii) Hostile, claiming that it is man-made and only the Bible alone is to be followed.

- Those who adopt the last two attitudes open themselves to the charge that they do not know what they believe or that they are unable to articulate what they believe, or worse still that the truth means so little to them that they do not care to state and defend it. By and large these assertions carry weight, for it is rare to find an able and bold defender of the faith who at the same time rejects the place of confessions of faith.

2. We do not regard the Confession as infallible and authoritative. We are bound only by Scripture. However, it is necessary and useful to have a clear statement of the Faith we believe, for ourselves as well as to commend to others. The 1689 Confession is a document which maintains doctrinal precision with a reasonable degree of fulness, and is handy as a reference manual whenever needed.

II. History Of The Confession

1. The first Particular Baptist Confession was published in 1644 in England. It was revised in 1646 and presented to Parliament. It consists of 52 articles, is strongly Calvinist and clearly asserts believer's baptism by immersion. It also restricts the Lord's Supper to baptised believers.

2. Between the years 1644 and 1648 an Assembly of Puritan Divines of England and Scotland had drawn up the Westminster Confession which was, and still is, highly esteemed by believers. But its church order was that of Presbyterianism, and Baptists differed from it

on important matters such as the nature of the gathered church, baptism, the Lord's Supper and church government.

3. In 1677 an assembly of Particular Baptist pastors and elders met and produced their second and fuller Confession of Faith. It was not signed at this stage because Charles II was then on British throne. It was a time of persecution. The introduction to the 1677 edition stated that it is a modification of the Westminster Confession and also of the Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order, “to convince all that we have no itch to clog religion with new words, but do readily acquiesce in that form of sound words, which hath been in consent with the Holy Scripture, used by others before us.”

4. A dozen years after the Baptist Confession was drawn up by the persecuted ministers a new era of liberty dawned. In 1689 thirty-seven leading Baptist ministers reissued the Confession and it was circulated among the churches. In England and Wales it became the definitive Confession of the Particular or Calvinistic Baptist churches and remained so for the next two centuries.

5. In 1744 it was adopted by the Calvinistic Baptists of North America, and called by them the Philadelphia Confession of Faith.

6. The youthful C. H. Spurgeon had been minister of the New Park Street Chapel, London, for a few months only when, in 1855, he determined to strengthen the doctrinal foundations of that and other churches by the re-issue of the Confession.

7. In 1958, the year when revival of interest in Reformed theology really began to accelerate, the Confession was republished. Further editions came in 1963, 1966, 1970 and 1974.

- In 1975 Carey Publications published “A Faith To Confess”, being the 1689 Confession rewritten in modern English by S. M. Houghton, together with a useful introduction. Further editions of this came nearly every two years after that.
- In 1980, Gospel Mission Press in America republished the original Confession.
- In the same year, Metropolitan Tabernacle (Spurgeon's Church) in London published the Confession containing brief notes by Dr. Peter Masters.

III. Comments On The Contents

1. Since the 1689 Confession was based on the Westminster Confession, many word-for-word similarities are to be seen. The following differences may be observed :

- (i) The chapter on the Church (Chap. 26) of the Baptist Confession consists of 15 paragraphs in comparison to 6 in the Westminster Confession.
- (ii) The Baptists grappled with the responsibility to promulgate the Gospel and added a Chapter (Chap. 20). This chapter is, with scarcely any variation, taken from the Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order, 1689, issued by the Congregational Independents.
- (iii) The Baptists omitted two chapters of the Westminster statement (Chaps. 30 and 31, on Church Censures and Synods and Councils), and unhappily the concluding two paragraphs on marriage and divorce (Chap. 24).

2. All who worthily bear the name of “Christian” should not find difficulty agreeing with fundamental doctrines such as the Trinity, Providence, the Fall of Man, the Atonement, Justification, and Repentance, which are in the Confession. Some Reformed Baptists have found it necessary to amend the Confession slightly to accord with their convictions.

- (i) In Chapter 26, paragraph 4, the Pope of Rome is declared to be “the antichrist, the man of sin, the son of perdition”. Some are unhappy with this on exegetical grounds.
- (ii) Chapter 10, paragraph 3, concerning the regeneration of infants does not accord with the conviction of some. Careful reading of the paragraph, however, reveals that “elect infants” are meant.
- (iii) It has been suggested that the Confession is out-of-date and inadequate in respect of the inerrancy of Scripture. But it needs to be noted that “inspiration” and “infallibility” as originally used in the Confession imply inerrancy.

3. The value of the Confession becomes clear as we see how it is capable of defending the orthodox Christian faith against the many distortions of truths found today.

(i) Modernists have rejected the view that the Scripture is divinely inspired, infallible (i.e. incapable of teaching deception), and inerrant (i.e. not liable to prove false or mistaken). They claim that the Bible contains mistakes and contradictions, and explain away supernatural events such as the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection in wholly naturalistic and abstract terms. Chapter 1 of the Confession on “The Holy Scripture” provides adequate defence of the orthodox position.

(ii) Charismatics are claiming prophecies and revelations direct from God. Chapter 1 of the Confession counters this by saying, “The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience” (paragraph 1). The whole counsel of God 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” (paragraph 6).

(iii) The “theory of evolution” is countered by the definite and clear teaching on Creation in Chapter 4.

(iv) Other examples : “theistic evolution” is precluded by Chapter 4, paragraph 1 and 2, and Chapter 6, paragraph 1; attacks on the divinity of Christ is countered by Chapter 8, paragraph 2; “free-willism” is countered by Chapter 9, paragraph 3; the denial of the need for Christians to keep the moral law is countered by Chapter 19, paragraph 5; “annihilation” and the denial that there is an everlasting punishment for the wicked is countered by Chapter 32, paragraph 2.

IV. Significance of the Confession

1. The 1689 Confession of Faith correctly expresses what we mean by Reformed and Baptist. It is a Confession of Faith for churches to be founded upon, a faith for church members to know, love, defend and propagate, a faith that church officers can hand down on to future generations. Church elders especially, by the nature of their functions (Titus 1:9), should have a copy with them always.

2. Churches from non-baptist denominations that have come to a reformed and baptistic position may find it not expedient to declare themselves as Reformed Baptist, although they have every right to do so. Such churches will find the 1689 Confession of Faith particularly useful in expressing what they have come to believe.

3. “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. Here the younger members of the church will have a body of divinity in small compass, and by means of the scripture proofs, will be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in them. Be not ashamed of your faith; remember it is the ancient

gospel of martyrs, confessors, reformers and saints. Above all, it is the *truth of God*, against which the gates of Hell cannot prevail. Let your lives adorn your faith, let your example adorn your creed. Above all live in Christ Jesus, and walk in him, giving credence to no teaching but that which is manifestly approved of him, and owned by the Holy Spirit. Cleave fast to the Word of God which is here mapped out for you.” C. H. Spurgeon.

Questions

1. How would you answer a person who says he only believes in the Bible and does not need a man-made creed like the 1689 Confession?
2. “Next to the Bible, know your Confession of Faith!” Comment. In a missionary situation, should the translation of the Confession of Faith take precedence over other books once the Bible has been translated? Why?
3. There are individuals and churches that have embraced the Five Points of Calvinism, but are non-cessationist, non-confessional, and practise contemporary worship. We would regard such churches as Calvinistic in soteriology (the doctrine of salvation), but not Reformed. As Reformed Baptists, consider our privileges, responsibilities, and implications.

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