

REFORMATION TODAY

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- ▶ The Church and the Ordinances
- ▶ Confessionalism
- ▶ Standing Tall in Troubled Times

The Church of the Living God





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43

Inside this Issue

- 03 Editorial
- 05 The Church and the Ordinances
- 12 Five Witnesses for Jesus
- 19 Christ our Peace
- 23 Confessionalism
- 34 What's in a name?
A Plea for Reformation Identity
- 38 Celebrating the Reformation
- 39 News
- 43 Standing Tall in Troubled Times
- 45 African Pastors' Conference News
- 46 New Books

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Editorial

KEES VAN KRALINGEN

The doctrine of the church is a much discussed topic these days for many reasons. Through modern media we now know about the church as it is found in the middle of radically different cultures all around the world. The church is under severe pressure in many parts of the world through fierce persecution. Sadly, the church is also divided and fragmented. In the western world church membership and attendance is declining in most mainline denominations. In response, people are now experimenting with a wide variety of different ways to be a church. Therefore, there is hardly any other topic that is being discussed more today than the doctrine and practice of the church (or ecclesiology to use the academic term).

But the New Testament church that has existed now for about 2000 years is still growing in many parts of the world. Why is this the case? Because the church is not a human institution; it is the church of the living God. He is alive and he keeps and builds his church through the Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the church. This is a tremendous comfort for all seriously-minded Christians who necessarily take a deep interest in the position of the church in this world. It is therefore highly appropriate that we publish this issue of *Reformation Today* not only with the next instalment of our series of doctrinal articles being an article on the doctrine of the church, but with the whole issue dedicated to the theme of the church of the living God.

In the middle of all this discussion about the church we need to be thinking again about the biblical doctrine and practice of

the church. In many cases church leaders ask what people really want from the church. The answers become the basis for the next idea and methodology to develop a church. But relatively few people seem to ask what is the view of the Head of the church! He has given his instructions in his Word. And although there are areas where there is legitimate freedom of opinion, the essential points are clear and are worthy of long and deep prayerful study in order to understand and obey the will of our Lord Jesus Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit.

The church, the Head, and the unity and diversity of its members

Robert Strivens gives us a concise but comprehensive and clear summary of the doctrine of the church and the ordinances. The church is built on the one foundation: Jesus Christ. This leads us to consider the person and work of the Lord Jesus, the second part of Bob Davey's exposition of John 5. The church is an organic unity as it is the body of Christ on earth. But as this picture of the body shows, the church is composed of many different members. The church should therefore display this healthy diversity as Andrew King argues. This is only possible because our Lord Jesus Christ has made peace, not only with God, but also with each other. This implies that however diverse the church is, we should display real spiritual and practical unity.

Unity AND truth, love AND obedience

Having mentioned unity, it is vitally important to realise that the Bible never propagates unity at the expense of truth, or love at the expense of obedience. These pairs always go hand in hand and should

be the mark of every visible, local church on earth. This means that any biblical church always takes great effort to confess the truth it believes based on Scripture alone with a view to believing, obeying and proclaiming the truth of God's Word, focused on the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Bill James helps us to think through what this means and how we do this using the Baptist Confession of 1689.

Remembering our history

Mentioning the Confession draws our attention to the history of the church, which is one great testimony to God's providential care for his church and for the preservation of the gospel. Robert Oliver reminds us of our historical roots as Reformed Baptists making a plea for us to maintain our identity. One way to do this is to celebrate the historical Reformation of the 16th-century, as John Palmer rightly argues. Next year will see the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's nailing his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, which is seen as the start of the Reformation. All of this material will hopefully help and strengthen us to remain faithful not just to the church at large or our local church in particular, but also to the truth of God's Word focused on Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour. Moreover, this should encourage and stimulate us to continue the proclamation of the gospel.

Pictures of the church

The New Testament uses various pictures to describe the nature and calling of the church. The church is depicted, for example, as a body (the body of Christ), a building, a temple, a priesthood, a holy nation, a pillar and buttress of the truth. Marriage is seen as an illustration of the relationship between Christ and the church. These pictures all appear in the articles in this issue. I should like to end

this editorial by pointing to two more of these pictures which point to the growth and development of the church.

The church as the household of God

The picture of the church as a building or temple in which God lives by his Spirit is an amazing illustration of God's gracious condescension. The eternal and living God not only saves sinners but also wants to have fellowship with his people. But Paul in 1 Timothy 3:15 gives us a kind of inverse picture. He calls the church the household of God. This points to the members of the church as God's family. We know that we have become God's children adopted by his saving grace. This picture of a household shows the intimacy of the relationship. The picture of a household or family also points us to the church as a place for growth, development, learning, protection, warmth.

The church as the flock of the Good Shepherd

We find this picture especially in John 10. The Lord Jesus Christ compares himself to a Good Shepherd who cares for his flock and even lays down his life for the sheep. The Lord Jesus also uses this picture to point to the future growth of the church in v 16: 'And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.' This refers to the widespread ingathering of people from all nations, tribes and tongues into the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. The great Shepherd will make sure that all will come in and none will be lost. This picture points us also to our task as under-shepherds to proclaim the gospel and reach the world with this glorious message. This will go on until the last day when our Lord will return. But this will be a topic for the next issue of *RT*! ■

The Church and the Ordinances

Origin

The church is not a human invention. The church finds her origin in the mind of God. It is in the counsels of the triune Godhead, in eternity, that the detailed plans for the initiation, progress, character, constitution and final shape of the church have been formulated (Eph 1:4). From before the foundation of the world, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit determined when and how the church would begin, how she would develop, who would belong to her, what sufferings and joys she would experience, the periods of blessing and of decline through which she would pass during the eras of world history and how she would finally arrive at her glorious consummation. Nothing has been left to chance or circumstance. Humans have made no contribution to any of these plans and have had no input of any kind into their shape. The entire future history of the church was fully worked out in the eternal decrees of God before the first human came to be.

Just as it is God who has planned out in advance the origin and life of the church, so it is he who ensures the implementation of those plans. It is he who made the covenants

on the basis of which the people of God in the Old Testament were formed. It is he who through the prophets promised a Messiah to provide salvation to peoples from all parts of the world. It is he who sent the Son into the world to become incarnate, to live and die and rise again from the dead. It is he who poured out his Holy Spirit upon the apostles at Pentecost and who continues to supply his Spirit in power to his church to sustain her and direct her to

maturity in Christ. And it is he who will come in the person of the Son, in glory, at the end of the age to bring in the last judgment and finally gather his elect people to himself to be with him for ever. From beginning to end, the church is the work of the triune God.

There is an important difference, however, between the planning and the implementation stages of the life of the

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church. The planning is all of God, without human help; by contrast, God is pleased to use humans as the principal secondary means for the growth, development, progress and life of his church. The authority, power and direction of the church lie with God, yet the means by which he implements his purposes for her involve humans as responsible agents. It is vital to grasp this distinction if Christians are to avoid, on the one hand, the crushing sense of responsibility which comes with the mistaken notion that the future of the church lies ultimately in their hands and, on the other, the laziness and apathy which flows from the view that believers have no real role to play in the healthy growth of the church because everything is in God's hands. In the life of the church in the world, God's plans will all be worked out perfectly, yet not without responsible human action.

Foundation

'The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord,' wrote Samuel John Stone, reflecting precisely Paul's teaching in Ephesians 2:20. It is on the Lord Jesus Christ and on his saving work on earth that the church is built. Psalm 118:22-23 tells of the stone rejected by builders which became the headstone. These verses are taken up in the New Testament (Matt 21:42) to refer to the rejection of the Lord Jesus at the hands of the Jewish leaders, his suffering and crucifixion, and his subsequent vindication by God the Father. Now, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him as the risen, ascended Messiah, the God-man now glorified in

heaven, ruling over his church as her Lord and gathering in his elect from the four corners of the globe by the hands of his messengers. Thus the saving work of Jesus Christ, in his incarnation, life, sufferings, death, resurrection and ascension form the foundation of the church.

The church thus owes, not only her existence, but her ongoing life and growth, to the foundation stone on which she is built, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Peter quotes from Psalm 118, as well as from two places in Isaiah, to substantiate this same point (1 Pet 2:4-10). Believers are those who have come in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ, who find him precious, and who are being built together on the foundation that is their Saviour, into a living temple to show forth the praises of God. The church thus owes, not only her existence, but her ongoing life and growth, to the foundation stone on which she is built, the Lord Jesus Christ. It was the events of Christ's life, suffering, death and resurrection, foretold in the prophecies of the Old Testament, which gave birth to the church and made it possible for her to live.

Life

If the church originates in the mind and plan of God and is built upon the person and work of Jesus Christ, she is vivified and sustained by the Holy Spirit. Just as the Spirit brooded upon the waters at creation (Gen 1:2), so he gives life and power to the church today.

The Day of Pentecost of Acts 2 is the day on which the church received the Spirit in power. The outpouring of the Spirit on that day signified the abundant provision which Christ has made for the life of his church in this gospel age. It is by the Spirit that

Christ distributes his gifts to the church, enabling her to function as his body, to grow and mature to the consummation. It is the Spirit who empowers the preachers of the Word so that the gospel has converting effect on the elect who hear. The daily life of the church, then, is dependent upon the continual work of the Holy Spirit.

Character

The divine origin and nature of the church determines her character: she is to be holy, as her God is holy (1 Pet 1:16). The church is the dwelling place of God by his Spirit (Eph 2:22). If the question is asked, where can we meet God today, the answer is in the church. That is where he has chosen to make his home, as it were, upon earth. The church is the very body of Christ, who is her head (Eph 1:22-23). If it is asked, then, where we may see Christ today, the answer again is, in the church. We need to feel the weight of the responsibility which this imposes upon us.

Thus the church is to reflect the very character of God. She is the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim 3:15), rejecting error and holding to the doctrine revealed to her from heaven by the Spirit and now recorded for her in the Scriptures. She is to flee from sin and pursue righteousness. She is to be given over to love and good works. Internally, she is to be marked by mutual forgiveness, the sharing of material possessions and care for spiritual progress. Externally, she is to hold forth the word of life to a dying world. These characteristics mark the daily life of the church and the conduct of her members.

Constitution

Just as the church is the creation of God,

so it is to be directed according to the Word of God. The Scriptures alone provide the authoritative constitution of the church of Jesus Christ (though individual local churches will also need their own, subordinate constitutions). All agree with this foundational principle but it is understood in different ways, especially in the two areas of church government and worship. Some believe that Scripture lays down the essential matters which are to guide the life of a church, but that believers are free to organise a church in whatever way they see fit provided that Scripture is not contravened. This view, which tends to be that of Anglicans and Lutherans, allows a great deal of freedom in matters such as church government and the content of meetings for worship. Others take the view that God in Scripture has directed how a church is to be governed and how his people are to worship him and that believers are not free to do as they please in these areas, subject only to express commands or prohibitions in Scripture.

Church government

Those influenced by Reformed thinking, including Baptists of a Calvinistic persuasion, limit the offices in the church to those expressly mentioned in the New Testament: elders and deacons (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Tim 3:1, 8). In broad terms, elders are responsible for the spiritual life of the church, particularly its teaching and the pastoral care of its members, and deacons are responsible for more practical matters to do with the organisation and administration of the activities of the church. Most would view pastors as a specific kind of elder, set aside particularly for the teaching ministry of the church (1 Tim 5:17), though some would argue that

pastors or ministers form a distinct, third office. Some would identify teachers as a separate office from that of the pastorate, as Calvin did in Geneva. Some view evangelists (see Eph 4:11) as representing a continuing office in the church, while many would say that the office of an evangelist has ceased (though obviously the activity of evangelism continues).

Worship

Are we free to organise the corporate worship of a church as we see fit, only avoiding the contravention of express biblical prohibitions, or does Scripture give us a comprehensive set of positive instruction on the subject? Reformed churches have tended to adhere to the latter position, which is sometimes known as the 'regulative principle'. The subject has attracted a considerable literature and the regulative principle itself is understood in different ways. In broad terms, however, Scripture consistently makes clear that it is God who determines how he is to be worshipped, not man. Those who invent their own ways of worshipping him are dealt with severely (Lev 10). We should therefore begin from the position that we look to the Bible to discover what we are to do when we worship God together.

That does not mean that every detail is prescribed. The Reformed have always held that matters of circumstance, such as time and place of meeting, naturally have to be agreed on a church-by-church basis. The main elements, however, are clear: Christian corporate worship is to

comprise the singing of praise to God, prayer and the reading and preaching of the Scriptures (see Eph 5:19; Col 3:16; 1 Tim 2-4). Baptism and the Lord's Supper are to be practised, as discussed below. Beyond this, it is not clear that we have warrant in the Bible for other activities in our meetings for corporate worship.

Membership

Who belongs to the church of Jesus Christ? Again, this is a matter that must be determined by reference to Scripture.

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Established churches and other national churches based on a parish system tend to treat everyone within the parish as a member of the church, unless proven otherwise. For Baptists, however, the church consists of those admitted on the basis of a clear profession of a living faith, for which credible evidence of regeneration is required. This is because Baptists believe that a fundamental shift has taken place between the Old and New Testaments. They understand the prophecy of the

new covenant in Jeremiah 31, for example, to teach that the people of God under the new covenant will all be believers (vv 33-34). When they come to the New Testament itself, they see that people are admitted by baptism to the church on the basis of their profession of faith (eg Acts 8:12). The Acts of the Apostles presents local churches as gatherings of believers and the epistles are written on the same assumption: that the recipients are believers (Acts 14:21-22), joined to Christ and in union with him by the Spirit through faith (Rom 6:11).

Baptists are sometimes accused of believing in a perfect church which does not exist on earth. This is untrue. Baptists accept that mistakes will be made and that some individuals in membership of their churches will not in fact be regenerate, despite having provided a testimony that has persuaded the church otherwise. Nevertheless, we believe that we should aim for the ideal of a regenerate membership, just as individual believers aim for the ideal of keeping from all sin despite the fact that we know that in this life we will continue to sin. In this sense, therefore, Baptists hold to the distinction between the visible and the invisible church: the visible church is the totality of those who belong to the churches on earth, whether in fact regenerate or not. The invisible church is made up only of the elect.

Some Christians apparently find it unnecessary to commit themselves to a local body of believers. They drift from one church to another, never settling anywhere. Some will settle for a while but then move off when something is said or done that upsets them. Such practices are sub-biblical. Christians who do not commit themselves to a local body of believers deny themselves the God-given means for growth and maturity in Christ (Eph 4:15-16). They deprive other believers of the blessing of fellowship with them and they deprive the local church of their gifts. They avoid the discipline of regular fellowship which God uses to mould them and shape them into conformity with Christ. The wandering Christian is not a phenomenon known to the Scriptures.

Ordinances

A definition of membership which is restricted, as argued above, to the

apparently regenerate, determines for the Baptist who it is who should be baptised. Baptism is the outward means of entrance into the visible church. The New Testament pattern is for the gospel to be preached and heard and for those who respond in faith to be baptised (Acts 8:12). Baptism by immersion would seem best to represent the symbolism of the believer's death, burial and resurrection with Christ (Rom 6:4). Some would point to the household baptisms in Philippi for evidence that the baptism of the head of a household led to the baptism of other members of the household, including children and no doubt also slaves (Acts 16:15, 33). There is no evidence, however, as to the age or state of faith or otherwise of those others in the relevant households and so these episodes cannot be conclusive on the question of who should be baptised. The answer must be worked out theologically, on the basis of the whole of Scripture, rather than by reference to proof texts.

Again, therefore, the question comes down to the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Specifically, does the new covenant in Christ extend to include the children of believers who have not yet come to personal faith in Christ? Put another way, do the promises of God's covenant with Abraham continue to apply, under the new covenant in Christ, to the physical descendants (the 'seed') of adults in the covenant? This question goes to the root of the differences between Baptists and those who believe in infant baptism. It is too complex to enter into in any detail here. In brief, Baptists answer that question in the negative because of the weight that they place on Paul's teaching that the true descendants of Abraham, to whom

the benefits of the covenant belong, are those who have faith in Christ (Gal 3:7). They believe this to be the import of the prophecies of the new covenant such as that of Jeremiah referred to above.

We are accused, because of these beliefs, of treating our children as if they were pagans. This is not the case. Baptists view the children of believers as highly privileged: they grow up in a Christian home, are taught the Bible, attend church regularly and learn the way of salvation. Yet we believe it to be seriously misleading for our children to be taught that they are in some real sense Christians, within the covenant, when they have yet to repent and put their faith in Christ. We believe that this is likely to lead to confusion. While regarding them as privileged, therefore (and understanding the reference to their being 'holy' in 1 Cor 7:14 in this way), we nevertheless press upon them the need personally to believe in Christ and do not baptise them unless and until satisfied on reasonable grounds that this is the case.

Similar principles apply to admission to the Lord's Supper: it is for baptised believers, in good standing with their local church. (For some Baptists, the Lord's Supper is restricted to the members of the church in question, but again there is not space to enter into this issue here.) Ironically, there is little difference on this point between Baptists and most of those who hold to infant baptism: with some exceptions, all agree that children should not come to the Lord's Table until they have made a clear profession of faith in Christ.

There are different understandings as to the significance of the Lord's Supper.

For some, it is principally a means of remembering the death of Christ and its significance for the believer. It is a time freshly to repent of sin and to come to the Lord in faith, for forgiveness and cleansing. It is an occasion to meditate on the death of Christ and grasp more fully what it means. Perhaps a fuller understanding, along the lines developed by John Calvin is better, seeing the Supper as in some sense a genuine partaking of the person of Christ, by faith and through the Spirit. In the Supper, we take hold of Christ, spiritually: we do indeed feed upon him. However the precise theology of the Lord's Supper is understood, it is clear that both it and the ordinance of baptism are means of grace. They are not optional: every believer should be baptised; no further guidance on this subject is needed beyond the clear command in Scripture (Acts 2:38). The Lord's Supper is a time of fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ which should be celebrated regularly within the context of the local church (and so should not be celebrated individually or in other contexts) (1 Cor 11:18, 20). By it our faith in Christ is fed and strengthened.

The Lord's Supper is associated in the New Testament with church discipline. It is clear that the churches of the New Testament were expected to take action when one of their members fell into serious sin or persisted in teaching serious error (1 Cor 5:4-5; 2 John 10). In either case, if the person concerned refused to repent after being confronted with his sin or error, he should be treated as an unbeliever. This means that he (or she) would not be admitted to the Lord's Supper, unless and until there was clear evidence of repentance. Church discipline should not involve being

barred from the ordinary meetings of the church for worship and preaching, as it is through these means that the church hopes for the restoration of the person under discipline. It does not mean that members refuse to speak to the individual concerned or have nothing to do with them. They should show them love and concern, whilst making clear that they do not regard that person as a believer in good standing with the church. The objective of church discipline is restoration, not permanent exclusion, and the motive is love, not justice.

The work of the church

So far, our consideration of the church has focused mainly on its divine nature and its inner workings. Yet the church is to be outward-looking. Its primary purpose is to show forth the praises of God, to promote his glory (1 Pet 2:9). It does that by the way that it lives in this fallen world, by the holiness of the lives of its members and by the purity of its worship of the living God. A vital part of this is the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. While it is right and necessary for individual Christians to be involved in general works of mercy and charity towards others in the world, the particular work of the church as the church is the preaching of the gospel. She must give herself to this work. It is accomplished in a multiplicity of ways: through the regular preaching of the Word on the Lord's Day, but also through going out to those who do not come in to church and taking the message to them, in whatever way we can. The church is Christ's means of taking the gospel of repentance and faith in him to all peoples in all corners of the globe. Thereby is his heavenly

The objective of church discipline is restoration, not permanent exclusion, and the motive is love, not justice.

Father glorified, as the elect are called effectively to him through repentance and faith in Christ.

The church on earth is sometimes referred to as the church militant, as opposed to the church glorified and at rest in heaven. In this life, the church is on a war footing. She is far from perfect and so is disciplined by her heavenly Father so that she may be mature

and perfected in Christ. She suffers in this world, because the world hates her just as it hated her Saviour (John 15:18). In many parts of the world, the church is persecuted in ways we do not experience in the West. Maybe we too will experience this before long. Persecution is the normal state of the church, according to Paul (2 Tim 3:12). In any case, we suffer in this world and experience the hostility of the world as we seek to live for Christ alone and preach him to the world.

The church in this world is to be a place of love and fellowship, though too often it is sadly a place of division and alienation. We have much to repent of. We need a far greater sense of our dependence upon Christ alone by his Spirit. We need to be stirred up to greater faith in Christ and love for him. We ought to have a far better grasp of his Word than we do. We should evangelise more and better than we do. We are not what we ought to be. But we press on, trusting in God's promises to his people in Christ, and we fully expect one day to be what we are not and have no right to expect to be: perfect and mature in Christ, in glory with him for ever. ■

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WITNESSES FOR JESUS

John 5:31-47

This is the second of two articles expounding John 5:17-47. The first article expounded 5:17-30 – Jesus defends himself and his ministry. This article expounds 5:31-47 – Five witnesses for Jesus.

Jesus has made the astounding claim that he is the Son of God and has explained the full scope of his mission. The religious leaders (5:18) would require evidence for these claims. Jesus anticipates their demand before they ask. He brings forth five witnesses in defence of his claims.

31 If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true.

Firstly Jesus acknowledges the authority of the law of Moses and that, by that law, his word alone was insufficient to establish his claims (Deut 19:15).

He then brings forward the five witnesses who would establish the truthfulness of his claims. The five witnesses are: John the Baptist, the miracles which Jesus did, the Father, the Scriptures and Moses.

Witness one for Jesus – John the Baptist (5:32-35)

32 There is another who bears witness of me, and I know that the witness which he witnesses of me is true. 33 You have sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth

There is another who bears witness of me. Jesus draws attention to the fact that he is not the only one who has borne public witness concerning himself. John the Baptist had been sent by God for that very purpose.

the witness which he witnesses of me is true. John had been sent by God to be the herald of the Messiah. He had introduced Jesus officially to the nation as the ‘Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (1:29) and ‘Son of God’ (1:34). John the Baptist was a true prophet of God, acknowledged by most in Israel. As a true prophet his witness cannot be anything else but true.

You have sent to John. Jesus reminds the Jews that the religious leaders had questioned John closely (1:19-23). Yet John had remained adamant in his witness about Jesus.

The five witnesses are: John the Baptist, the miracles which Jesus did, the Father, the Scriptures and Moses.

34 Yet I do not receive testimony from man, but I say these things that you may be saved.

But the case for Jesus does not depend on the witness of John the Baptist alone, however great and worthy he may be, because John was but a human authority. The reason why Jesus presses on them John’s testimony is that they may believe it and find salvation. Jesus shows his divine heart of love. He desires salvation, even for his enemies who want to kill him (5:18).

35 He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light.

Jesus reveals the shallowness of the Jewish leaders. At the beginning of the ministry of John the Baptist they had gladly received him as a genuine prophet. But John’s unrelenting preaching against sin had become too much for them.

Their proud hearts prevented them from repenting fully to God and they became offended at John's popularity among the common people.

He was the burning and shining lamp. John's public ministry was now ended. He was in prison awaiting the martyr's crown. His ministry had been like a burning beacon or a lighthouse to all the people. What a testimony from the mouth of Jesus toward God's faithful servant! Love always gives praise whenever it can.

Witness two for Jesus – the miracles which Jesus did (5:36)

36 But I have a greater witness than John's; for the works which the Father has given me to finish – the very works that I do – bear witness of me, that the Father has sent me.

But I have a greater witness than John's. Jesus has already said that he did not depend on the witness of John the Baptist only. Now he suggests a greater witness, a witness which they could not ignore. The witness is the miracles which he did. The miracles were a witness from God as to the truth of his teaching and claims.

The religious authorities had been aware of these miracles from the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem (2:23). The Jews had not denied that the miracles had happened, but they suggested that the power behind them was not God's, but Satan's (Mark 3:22). Jesus' answer was that it was impossible for that to be so. The miracles built the kingdom of God and destroyed Satan's kingdom. Satan could not do that (Mark 3:23-26). So the miracles could not be so easily dismissed as evidence of the truth of his claims.

Nicodemus was right when he said to Jesus, 'A man could not do these things unless he was from God' (John 3:2). See also chapter 9:31-33.

The miracles of Jesus throughout his ministry (a) were very many; (b) were always complete; (c) could bear any examination; (d) had great variety across the course of nature; (e) were always works of love and mercy, and (f) were revelation of truth and not mere wonder workings.

for the works which the Father has given me to finish – the very works that I do. However, Jesus does draw attention to the fact that, not just the miracles, but his whole teaching ministry was of God as well. Jesus had already said to the disciples, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to finish his work' (4:34). And towards the end of his earthly ministry he was to say in prayer to his Father, 'I have finished the work which you have given me to do' (17:4). The work of Jesus on earth ended in his death on the cross followed by his resurrection and ascension into heaven.

Witness three for Jesus – the Father (5:37,38)

37 And the Father himself, who sent me, has testified of me. You have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his form.

38 But you do not have his word abiding in you, because whom he sent, him you do not believe.

the Father himself ... has testified of me. God the Father, himself, had on one occasion testified verbally to Jesus being the Son of God. He did so at the baptism of Jesus. John the Baptist heard it, and bore witness to it (Matt 3:16,17; John 1:32-34).

You have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his form. But God, in his essence and being, is a spiritual being, without physical form or voice (1 Tim 6:16). In general terms, therefore, the witness of the Father has to be an indirect one. The Father was with Jesus in everything which Jesus did, 'A man could not do these things unless he was from God' (3:2). This non-verbal witness was nevertheless just as real and valid as the verbal. God is always speaking through his creation, and in his acts of providence.

But you do not have his word abiding in you, because whom he sent, him you do not believe. Jesus takes the opportunity to rebuke the Jewish leaders. For all their apparent reverence and zeal for God, they were completely ignorant of God's mind. They proved their ignorance by not believing on Jesus whom the Father had sent.

Witness four for Jesus – the Scriptures (5:39,40)

Jesus produces his fourth witness. This witness was the authoritative revelation of God's mind and will – the inspired and infallible Scriptures. The religious Jews did indeed accept the authority of this witness.

39 You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of me.

You search the Scriptures. Jesus gives the religious leaders credit that they acknowledged the authority of their

Scriptures and diligently studied them. They did so for the right reason too.

for in them you think (reckon) you have eternal life. The religious Jews correctly reckoned that the way to eternal life was revealed to them by God in the Scriptures. That was why they revered and diligently studied them. Jesus gives them full honour for this. Their error was that they misinterpreted them.

ALL THE PROMISES ABOUT THE MESSIAH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT SCRIPTURES, TOGETHER WITH ALL THE PROPHECIES, POINTED TO HIM.

and these are they which testify of me. The claim of Jesus is crystal clear. All the promises about the Messiah in the Old Testament Scriptures, together with all the prophecies, pointed to him. He was the fulfilment of them all. The Scriptures were the fourth witness.

40 But you are not willing to come to me that you may have life.

Why then did the Jewish religious leaders not see the truth? Why did they

misinterpret the Scriptures? Jesus answers those unspoken questions. Their problem was not in their minds so much as in their hearts and wills.

you are not willing. The Jews did not recognise who Jesus was because their hearts were wrong. Their hearts were prejudiced. That prejudice made them blind to the truth. It affected their thinking. So, because of their proud and stubborn hearts, they rejected Jesus.

that you may have life. They did not want Jesus, even if it meant missing eternal life!

It must have been with great sadness that Jesus spoke these words of condemnation. The problem of the human race has always been the same, ever since sin entered. The root problem is not in the mind so much as in the heart and will. The spiritual bondage is in the will. Only the Holy Spirit can break down the stubbornness of the heart and open the mind to the truth. 'And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil' (3:19).

A rebuke to the Jews for their unbelief (5:41-44)

41 I do not receive honour from men.

But I know you, that you do not have the love of God in you.

I do not receive honour from men. Jesus neither needed nor desired any praise from man (2:23-25).

But I know you. And Jesus would definitely not seek the favour of his critics because he understood them only too well. He knew their inmost thoughts and motives, and they were not good.

that you do not have the love of God in you. The truth of the matter was that the religious leaders who were rejecting Jesus did not really love God. They drew close to God with words but their hearts were far from him. If they truly had the love of God in them, they would have been open to the truth rather than closed against it. Such was their spiritual blindness that they could not recognise the way of salvation, nor receive it.

At the Day of Judgment Jesus will say to

all the lost that there was no love of God in them.

43 I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive.

if another comes in his own name, him you will receive. Not only were these religious leaders rejecting Jesus as God's true messenger but at the same time they were prepared to receive religious teachers whose only authority was themselves.

The rabbis, the religious teachers whom Jesus was referring to, were venerated by the people and among themselves because of all their learning. Their teachings and traditions became so venerated and accepted that the result was that their teachings cancelled out the true meaning of the Scriptures. At a later date Jesus was to speak very critically of these Pharisees and scribes. He called them hypocrites. How could they escape the condemnation of hell? (Matt 23:1-33)? Yet these very men deceived themselves into believing that they had God's approval.

Jesus warned that there will always be false teachers who draw many away from the truth into sects and cults. These false teachers will have no real love for God either. Their authority will be themselves not God. Beware of them and shun them, even though they seem so plausible and are so winsome with their promises (Matt 24:11,12,24). Even the Antichrist, the greatest false prophet of them all, will gain a worldwide following in his day. His message will be appealing and widely received, 'God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie,

that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness' (2 Thess 2:9-12). God is not mocked. Beware of false teachers and false claims.

44 How can you believe, who receive honour from one another, and do not seek the honour that comes from the only God?

How can you believe, who receive honour from one another. While the religious leaders continued to care more about what other people thought of them than what God thought of them, it was impossible for them to believe and be saved.

and do not seek the honour that comes from the (one and) only God. Though the religious leaders boasted that they and the Jewish nation alone knew and worshipped the only true God, their trouble was ungodliness. They were self-centred rather than God-centred.

the (one and) only God. There is the One and only God over the whole human race. And the reason why people do not turn to this true and living God is because of a fundamental ungodliness in them. If this were not true, the whole world would have been converted to Christ long ago.

Having warned the religious leaders, Jesus now produces his fifth and final witness to the truth of all his claims.

Witness five for Jesus – Moses (5:45-47)

45 Do not think that I shall accuse you to the

Father; there is one who accuses you – Moses, in whom you trust.

Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father. Jesus warns the religious leaders that at the Day of Judgment, when he will be the Judge, it will not be necessary for him to accuse them of wrong in rejecting him and his claims. Another one will do it for him.

accuse you to the Father. Note that the Father will be identified with Jesus in the Judgment. There is unity between the Father and the Son in the Judgment.

there is one who accuses you – Moses. Now Jesus produces his fifth witness. Moses will be a witness for him! Moses himself will be the witness against the religious leaders and their followers on the Day of Judgment! Moses himself will accuse them for their rejection of Jesus.

The religious leaders would have been shocked by these words, shocked to the core of their being. The words of Jesus would have seemed extremely blasphemous and proof of his megalomania.

in whom you trust. The religious leaders pinned all their hopes of salvation on the Law of Moses. For them, the Law of Moses was God's foundational word. The task of the Messiah was to bring the Law of Moses to full fruition and final realisation. The religious leaders all believed that the first five books of the Old Testament (the Torah) were God-inspired and very special. They

BEHIND THE WARNINGS IS DIVINE LOVE.

were very proud of the fact that God had revealed such mysteries to the nation through Moses and his writings.

46 For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote about me.

For if you believed Moses, you would believe me. We have to remember that all Scripture is inspired, God-breathed (2 Tim 3:15-17), the Old Testament and the New Testament alike. The Pharisees recognised this concerning the Old Testament, which included the books of Moses. Jesus is endorsing that view here.

he wrote about me. Jesus would be referring them to the book of Deuteronomy, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear ... I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him' (Deut 18:15,18). Jesus claims to be the fulfilment of this specific prophecy of Moses.

The other four witnesses: John the Baptist, the miracles which Jesus did, the Father, and the Scriptures were the evidences that Jesus was indeed that Prophet about whom Moses had spoken.

47 But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?

God, anticipating the rejection of Jesus, had gone on to give a severe warning through Moses, 'And it shall be that whoever will not hear my words which he speaks in my name, I will require it of him' (Deut 18:19). In effect in rejecting him,

the religious leaders were also rejecting both God and Moses. If that was so, then the foundation of their faith was gone and they were under the curse of Moses.

how will you believe. Jesus is still pointing the religious leaders to the way of salvation in himself. Behind the warnings is divine love. Jesus drew no pleasure from the terrible spiritual state of the religious leaders and what it caused them to be.

believe my words. It was just as Moses had prophesied. The very words of Jesus did indeed form a valid witness to his being the Son of God. As God had prophesied, 'my words which he speaks in my name' (Deut 18:19).

Jesus was to free many Jews from the yoke of spiritual slavery to the scribes and Pharisees. Indeed, some of the Pharisees themselves would be saved. In John's Gospel we know of at least two who would receive salvation, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. It was a Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, who would be brought to faith in Christ Jesus and who would then become Paul the great apostle and witness for Jesus to the Gentiles.

Today, in the Gospels, we can read the words of Jesus and can discover for ourselves that his words are absolutely true and perfect. Jesus is the Truth, as God is Truth (John 14:6). As Jesus said: **Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will by no means pass away** (Matt 24:35). ■

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CHRIST OUR Peace

Shop Windows

Retail shops use their glass windows to display the glory of the products inside. In the same way, each local church is the place where God has chosen to display the glory of Christ and his gospel. Paul writes in Ephesians 3:10 that *through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places*. Isn't that amazing?

But how exactly is the vast wisdom of God to be displayed in your church? Well, in Ephesians 2, Paul teaches how God's wisdom is especially seen as the gospel of his Son Jesus Christ makes sinners at peace both with him and with each other.

In Ephesians 2:8-12 the 'you' refers to the Gentile believers in Ephesus and the 'we' (in 1:12) refers to the apostle Paul and other Jewish believers. Yet for us, what explains that greater peace and unification (between Jewish and Gentile believers) surely also explains the peace and unification that exists between all

believers as well. So where is the source of this peace?

The Source of Peace

In Ephesians 2:13-16 Paul's teaching gets to the heart of the gospel. Whereas at one time those Gentiles in Ephesus were 'far off', now they are 'near'. But at what time were they far off?

Well, there was a time in salvation-history when all Gentiles were outside of God's old covenant framework. But now in Christ Jesus – since his birth, life and death – those who were far off have now been brought near. Hundreds of years earlier, the Lord had spoken through Isaiah, *Peace, peace, to the far and to the near* (Is 57:19). And now that time had come.

Yet in addition to the salvation-history aspect, the 'but now' also includes the personal conversion experience of each of these Ephesian believers. After all, chapter 2 starts with Paul's retelling of how they were once dead in trespasses and sins but now had been saved by grace through the gift of faith in Christ Jesus.

EACH LOCAL CHURCH IS THE PLACE WHERE GOD HAS CHOSEN TO DISPLAY THE GLORY OF CHRIST AND HIS GOSPEL.

For he himself is our peace. How much could be developed from this truth! Christ is the source of our entire renewal individually in body and soul, collectively as communities of his people, and one day as part of the renewed heaven and earth; peace and harmony with God, with other believers, and with all creation because of the person and work of our Saviour Jesus Christ. Hallelujah!

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace. This is the headline truth upon which all the following verses hang. And this is the explanation we need to give to our watching neighbours. Just how was this peace accomplished? Did one event bring you peace with God and another event bring peace with other believers? No, Paul makes it clear that the same one action did it all: Christ's death on the cross.

The coming of Jesus Christ into our world has ended the time of the old covenant framework with its particularly Jewish focus and practices. And so now the temporary scaffold framework of separation has been abolished between Jews and Gentiles. Instead of the temporary animal sacrifices (that could never truly deal even with Jewish sins), the substance – the perfect sacrifice of the Lamb of God – has come and fully paid the necessary price for sins. Christ himself is our peace both horizontally and vertically. And Paul is clear that the centre of this peacemaking is the cross.

The Display of Peace

How has the reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles been shown? The answer is:

by making them both new! It is vital we both grasp and teach this truth! In verse 15 Paul writes, *that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace.* So it was not that believing Gentiles became more Jewish, nor that believing Jews became more Gentile. Instead, believers from both groups have been made entirely new in Christ. They are new creations called Christians!

National Israel had been described through the old covenant as the vine that the Lord brought out of Egypt (as in Psalm 80). Yet, sadly, their own history showed them more a place of barrenness than fruitfulness towards God. And so Jesus declared with his coming in the flesh that he is the true vine. Now the question was not whether you were in natural Israel, but whether you were in Christ.

No doubt we have to think harder here to grasp more of the revolution Paul was speaking about. Jews and Gentiles now fully united – really? A new humanity, no longer divided by a hostile wall of separation, but both made new and united in Christ. Really? Yes! Paul affirms that the Cross work of Christ has established a level playing field. Now sinners from both communities – by faith in Christ – become part of the new covenant community – his body, the church.

And so from verses 19-22 the key point of application is that there is to be one people, not two. One church, not two. Part of the very display of the gospel is the new blood-bought unity between once alienated people. We are no longer at war with each other because we are no longer alienated from God.

Be a Mixed Church

Having one church for one 'type of Christian' and another type of church for another 'type of Christian' is therefore contrary to the gospel itself. If Christ has broken down the barrier separating Jews and Gentiles then surely he has broken down every other barrier that exists. Surely the one place your neighbour ought to see deep peace displayed is within your church! Yes, a few communities are genuinely diverse and do live together in peace. How much more then must our churches display the glory of the gospel through even greater and even deeper diversity?

Press on in your mixed church: mixed ages, mixed abilities, mixed gender, mixed wealth, mixed social interests, mixed family settings. Often when we consider diversity today we think of ethnicity. Well, certainly our churches ought to be as diverse as the communities we live in. What a tragedy if racial prejudice is still seen in our churches!

Is your church intentionally diverse? Are you collectively displaying the gospel of peace by being this new humanity in Christ? No doubt we are all grappling with strengthening this display but let me finish by focusing on two common mistakes that undermine the display of gospel diversity.

Reject the Designed Niche

The 'homogeneous unit principle' sounds so sensible. It teaches that we are wiser to target specific groups of people with the gospel according to their group preferences. But the danger is that it leads to a church

that is as much identified by age or class or ethnicity as it is by the gospel.

Yet our churches are to defy the cultural gravity toward niche communities and reach out and embrace all believers in Christ. Perhaps there were voices at that Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15 suggesting that full integration be postponed for a few generations. Hadn't there already been friction in Jerusalem between Jews and Greeks with the serving at tables? Wouldn't it have been wiser to

How much more then must our churches display the glory of the gospel through even greater and even deeper diversity

establish two food banks, not one? But no, the New Testament letters know nothing of separate streams of church. Yes, you can build a church faster if you centre it on a single age group, or ethnicity or social class ... and yes, you can preach Christ and see genuine conversions ... but you will lose the full glorious rainbow colour of a more biblically diverse church. I urge you to keep resisting the logic of pushing the homogeneous unit principle too far ... because it

is not the true logic of the gospel. Press on in your mixed church (and therefore resist the temptation toward a 'niche church').

Reject the Default Niche

I also urge you to keep resisting the danger of becoming a niche church by default. This can happen if you fix outward modes that are comfortable to just one group of people. Whilst these external forms may be as comfortable as a pair of well-worn slippers, they can unhelpfully alienate other believers whom the Lord may add to your number. Some of us find it harder to change and adapt to welcome different people into our membership. Yet perhaps

through a reluctance to change, we may slowly become a niche church for our own particular age or class or background.

The unity of the gospel is not uniformity to outward forms. Rather, the unity of the gospel is a diversity in unity that images our Trinitarian God. Young people aren't to be welcomed on condition that they 'act old'; working-class people aren't to be welcomed on condition that they take on middle-class habits; folks born overseas are welcome on condition that they assimilate into your homeland.

I don't know if any of you have ever played 'fantasy football'? You have a budget to buy the dream team of players and then play them in a simulated championship league. I sometimes find myself playing fantasy church where I get to choose my dream membership of Christians who make for a united team. But the danger is that my dream membership is all male, my age, middle class, university educated and love books more than films or football!

How thankful I am (in my saner moments) that the church is to be a community conforming to Christ and not to me, a supernatural community where I am confronted with my need for sanctification as well! And so I urge you to actively press on in your mixed church even when that means encouraging legitimate changes for the sake of the gospel but against personal preferences.

Perhaps your 'dream church' members are all of the same external forms and cultural

preferences as you? Well, be careful that you don't slide into a niche church that slowly removes the healthy diversity of age, class and background.

The Acid Test

How healthy is your church when it comes to gospel 'diversity in unity'? How could you tell? Well, what would happen if Christ were to leave your church? Hopefully you'd say, 'We'd fall apart very quickly!' Good. A healthy mixed church can only be explained by the presence of Jesus Christ through his

Spirit. A healthy mixed church isn't merely a natural social gathering with religion (or solid Bible teaching) tagged on. No, it is a supernatural gathering of outwardly different people who are now at peace in Christ. If Christ were to leave, the church would fall apart. Christ is our peace – not our common age, culture or anything else. And so we all need to view each other

together in Christ and so to be humble, gentle and patient as all that is un-Christ-like is changed in them and us.

How does your church display the gospel? *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace.*

How is all this possible? I'll let the Apostle Paul have the final say: *Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever.* ■

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BILL JAMES



Confessionalism

During the course of the 18th and 19th centuries some church leaders could be heard attacking historic confessions of faith. For example, Charles Beecher (1815-1900) denounced 'creed power' and argued for 'the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible.'¹

A similar cry is taken up by many Evangelicals today: let us hold to the Bible alone. There are a number of reasons for this view. Some are weary of complex theological formulations, and want to return to what they see as the simplicity of the primitive church, and a straightforward emphasis on spiritual experience and godly living rather than academic debates about doctrine. Others are impatient with all things historical, and want to prioritise what is new and contemporary. But most of all, there is the claim that a 'Bible only' position expresses faithfulness to the Reformation doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. There is something very appealing about sitting down with just the

Such a negative view of historic confessions is both unwise and unhelpful.

Bible, and the aid and direction of the Holy Spirit himself; surely this is the 'spiritual' approach?

However, for all of its appeal, I am going to argue that such a negative view of historic confessions is both unwise and unhelpful.

Unwise because if we ditch our historic confessions then we leave our churches exposed to theological error. Leaders like Charles Beecher in the 18th and 19th centuries who were critical of creeds and confessions were theological liberals. They wanted to be held to the Bible alone, because they wanted the freedom to be able to express and develop their own novel interpretations.

Abandonment of confessions is unhelpful, because we are impoverished if we so easily discard the legacy of theological truth and biblical wisdom expressed by godly leaders through the centuries of church history. Yes, it is very appealing to sit down with just the Bible and the aid

¹ Quoted in Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (Yale UP), p182.

of the Holy Spirit, but am I so arrogant as to believe that my spiritual insights are greater and deeper than those of theologians through the centuries who have been guided and directed by the same Holy Spirit?

So, I will seek to make the case for our churches today to subscribe to an historic Confession; actually one historic Confession in particular – the London Baptist Confession of 1689. This would serve four purposes:

- » To combat error
- » To confess the gospel
- » To confess our unity with the stream of historic Christianity
- » To confess our unity with other believers.

Finally, I'm going to answer a couple of objections or problems which I anticipate.

1. To combat error

Refuting error is a fundamental responsibility of church leaders. One of the qualifications of eldership is not only to encourage others by sound doctrine, but also to refute those who oppose it (Titus 1:9). Paul charges the Ephesian elders to defend the church from men who will distort the truth (Acts 20:28-32).

To deny error is a vital part of expressing our beliefs; we must express the negative as well as the positive. The apostle Paul declares that we are saved by faith, but only when he clarifies 'and not by works' is his meaning clear. Jesus teaches us that the 'hired hand' may be willing to feed the sheep, but never confronts the wolves (John 10:12-13).

Ever since the beginning of church history, heresy and error have been refuted by the formulation of doctrinal statements. Indeed, the development of creedal statements in the early church was essentially a reaction to heretical teachings.

This was most notably the case in the debate between Athanasius and Arius, in which theological concepts needed to be clearly articulated, and words carefully chosen and defined. Then at the time of the Reformation further confessional statements were required to clarify biblical teaching on salvation, and the nature of the church.

In combating heresy, it is not enough to say that you believe the Bible. Everyone who professes to be a Christian will agree with that statement, whether they be Roman Catholic, Anglican, Unitarian, Quaker, Spiritualist or Jehovah's Witness. If we want to refute error, we need to frame our doctrinal statements and confessions with great care. It is not enough to say to a Roman Catholic that we believe in salvation by grace. So does he; but he defines the word 'grace' in a different way. We believe in justification by faith, and again, so does he. It is just that we believe in justification by faith alone.

Historically we see that weakness in our doctrinal confession will leave us open to downgrade in the future. The Quakers' resistance to any clear statement of faith left them open to subjectivism and mysticism. The General Baptists' minimal statement of faith in the 17th century made them vulnerable to Arian teaching in the 18th century.

2. To confess the gospel

The business of the church is not simply to refute error, but also positively to promote and to expound the Gospel. Indeed, in 1 Timothy 3:15 the church is described as being the pillar and ground of the truth. In other words, the church is the means God uses both to preserve and to uphold the truth of the gospel – both presenting the gospel to the outside world so that they might be converted, and also expounding the gospel within the church so that God's people might be reminded of the truth, and instructed and edified according to God's revelation. When you move on to verse 16 you see what seems to be a brief confessional summary of the Gospel. Indeed, the verse begins 'by common confession...' (Greek: *homologoumenos*).

He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.

We could add other examples, for example 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, Philippians 2:5-9. It seems that the early church formulated confessions of faith, ie summaries of the gospel incorporating key doctrinal points, which they might use as hymns, or as creeds to recite.

It does seem reasonable, does it not, that if the truth of the gospel is so central to the life and mission of the church, it should be summarised in key points, so that it

is clear to all what is believed and what message is being declared.

The introduction to the minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association from 1707 to 1807 states that:

'In every period of its existence the Association has firmly maintained the soundest form of Scripture doctrine; nor could any church have been admitted, at any period, which denied or concealed any of the doctrines of grace. The New Testament has always been its only rule of faith and practice, as with all Baptists. To let the world know how we understand the teaching of the Holy Ghost in these inspired books, the Association published, in 1742, its Confession of faith and discipline. This confession was published by ministers and brethren, representing about forty churches, met in London, in 1689. It was printed for the Philadelphia Association by Benjamin Franklin, and numerous editions have been issued. Throughout the United States it is generally considered as the standard of orthodoxy among Baptists. It differs but slightly from the Westminster Confession of Faith published by the "Assembly of Divines"'.²

In practice, every church and every Christian leader has their own understanding of the Gospel, their own confession of faith. The problem is, as Carl Trueman puts it so well, that not many of them write it down.³ But why should we be left guessing about the doctrinal position of the pastor, or the church?

² Quoted from Wayne Mack in: Erroll Hulse (ed.), *The Ideal Church* (1972), p53.

³ Carl Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Crossway, 2012).

When Charles Spurgeon reprinted the 1689 Confession for his church in 1855, the introduction included these words:

‘This ancient document is a most excellent epitome of the things most surely believed among us... 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 ... 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 ... Cleave fast to the Word of God, which is here mapped out to you...’

You see the sense that the Confession is a means of edifying the church. It provides a standard of doctrinal understanding that we long for all church members to attain. So it is quite natural to have a discipleship course, or a series of teaching sessions, working through the Confession. It comes as no surprise when you deal with the doctrines of grace, or the covenants, or the nature of the sacraments, or the nature of the church, because all of these things are part of our doctrinal statement, the Confession, and this is what many churches believe around the globe and through the centuries of church history.

This is the positive vision of the apostle Paul who speaks of growth in unity and

understanding together Ephesians 4:13: *until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ* (NIV). We are to grow together to a maturity of faith and knowledge. Within the local church we should not be content with superficial understanding, or meagre expressions of Gospel truth. Rather, we teach the whole

SO IT IS QUITE NATURAL TO HAVE A DISCIPLESHIP COURSE, OR A SERIES OF TEACHING SESSIONS, WORKING THROUGH THE CONFESSION

counsel of God, longing that all might grasp the depths and glories of God’s grace in Christ. The teachers and leaders in the local church should be able to adopt a substantial confession, and strive for all to attain to full understanding.

The American Baptist B H Carroll, in his *Interpretation of the English Bible*, made these comments on Ephesians 4:1-16: ‘A Christian’s creed should enlarge, and not diminish, up to the last utterance of revelation in order that each article might

be transmitted into experience ... The more divine doctrines a church can agree on, the greater its power, and the wider its usefulness. The fewer its articles of faith, the fewer its bonds of union and compactness ... The longest creed of history is more valuable and less hurtful than the shortest.’

To maximise our confession is not a burden, but a blessing. Carroll continues: ‘The modern cry: “Less creed and more liberty,” is a degeneration from the vertebrate to the jellyfish, and means less unity and less morality, and it means more heresy. Definitive truth does not create

heresy – it only exposes and corrects. Shut off the creed and the Christian world would fill up with heresy unsuspected and uncorrected, but none the less deadly.’

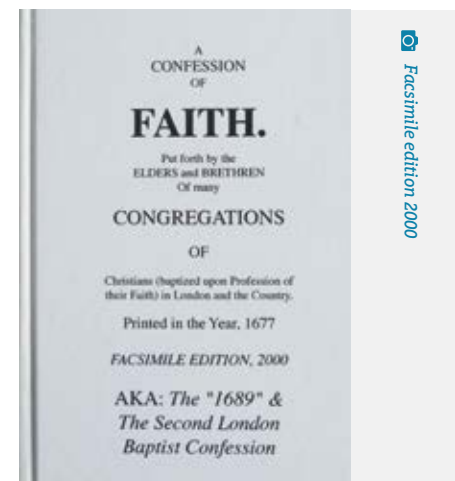
It seems to me that the 1689 is a good model of a coherent and comprehensive system of theology. Coherent in the sense that there is the conviction that Scripture is written ultimately by one Author, with one central purpose, and a plotline of divine grace that unfolds seamlessly from Genesis to Revelation. Comprehensive in the sense that the Bible claims to tell us all that we need to know for salvation and a life which pleases God.

The Confession provides a wealth and a depth not present in a modern skeletal basis of faith which simply homes in on key doctrines expressed in a minimalistic way.

3. To confess our unity with the stream of historic Christianity

We believe in the historic biblical Christian faith. In other words, when we as a church express our theological convictions these are not doctrines that we have developed simply through our own personal reflections. My beliefs are not just my own ideas which I have chosen (the word heresy comes from the Greek word meaning ‘to choose’). Rather, my confession identifies me with the stream of historic Christianity.

It is not for each generation of Christian believers to re-invent the wheel. It is not for us to ‘start from scratch’, and discard all the wisdom of the ages in our understanding of biblical truth. Certainly I must test all doctrines against the Bible.



I must not believe anything only because it is in the 1689 Confession; Scripture alone has supreme authority. But it would be arrogant of me to believe that a true and faithful interpretation of Scripture begins with my generation (and perhaps will die with my generation?). No, the Lord has his people in every age of human history. Through the centuries Christ has been building his church, and the church of the 21st century is but the latest element of a glorious and historic tradition.

To put it another way, I believe in the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the church. Just as I depend upon the Holy Spirit to illuminate and guide and direct me in a faithful understanding of his words in Scripture, so I believe that the Holy Spirit has been at work in each and every generation. I rejoice in the insights and faithful testimony of others. Specifically (in the case of the 1689 Confession) I am grateful to stand shoulder to shoulder with John Bunyan, William Carey and Charles Spurgeon, to mention but a few.

More than that, the 1689 Confession connects us to the legacy of the Puritans and the Reformers, who were themselves consciously maintaining the traditions of the early church's confessions and creeds. We celebrate the work of the Holy Spirit in giving his people deeper and broader understanding of the Word through the centuries.

Perhaps the word 'tradition' raises hackles. It should not do so, as long as our traditions are thoroughly scriptural. Indeed, Scripture itself speaks of handing down the tradition of gospel teaching from one generation to the next (eg 2 Tim 2:2). In the early church there was acceptance of the principle that the Scriptures were to be expounded and interpreted by the church within the framework of the *regula fidei* (the faith). In other words, we are to expect a consensus in the church regarding the gospel message and what the Scriptures say. This is the scriptural tradition within the church, and this is the position to which the Reformers returned.

Nowadays in evangelicalism, the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* is too often misunderstood as *Solo Scriptura*⁴ – in other words all that is needed is an individual believer interpreting the Bible with the aid of the Holy Spirit alone. Martin Luther is hailed as the hero of the modern evangelical

because of his declaration at the Diet of Worms: 'Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God.'

PERHAPS THE WORD 'TRADITION' RAISES HACKLES. IT SHOULD NOT DO SO, AS LONG AS OUR TRADITIONS ARE THOROUGHLY SCRIPTURAL

Richard Muller describes the *Solo Scriptura* position as all of theology ought to be constructed anew, without reference to the church's tradition of interpretation, by the lonely exegete confronting the naked text. But this was never what was intended by the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*, and was never the position of Martin Luther. Hear what he says in another place, defending the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper:

'This article moreover, has been clearly believed and held from the beginning of the Christian Church to this hour – a testimony of the entire holy Christian Church, which, if we had nothing besides, should be sufficient for us. For it is dangerous and terrible to hear or believe anything against the united testimony, faith and doctrine, of the entire holy Christian Church, as this has been held now 1,500 years, from the beginning, unanimously in all the world.'

Charles Hodge makes a similar point:

'Again, Protestants admit that as there has been an uninterrupted tradition of

truth from the protevangelium to the close of the Apocalypse, so there has been a stream of traditional teaching flowing through the Christian Church from the day of Pentecost to the present time. This tradition is so far a rule of faith that nothing contrary to it can be true. Christians do not stand isolated, each holding his own creed. They constitute one body, having one common creed. Rejecting that creed, or any of its parts, is the rejection of the fellowship of Christians, incompatible with the communion of saints, or membership in the body of Christ. In other words, Protestants admit that there is a common faith of the Church, which no man is at liberty to reject, and which no man can reject and be a Christian.⁵

What the Reformers opposed was not all tradition, but only the appearance of a new tradition between the 12th and 14th centuries, namely that the Magisterium became a new and distinct source of divine revelation.

What the Reformers asserted was that Scripture alone is the source of authoritative divine revelation. So, tradition should not be for us a dirty word. When we appoint elders we pass on what we have ourselves received (2 Tim 2:2; 2 Thess 2:15, 3:6; 1 Cor 11:2). This speaks of a conviction that pastors and elders are servants of the tradition, not the other way around. In other words, individual pastors might come and go, but the tradition endures.

I am not free as a pastor to be authoritarian and to impose on the church all manner of practices and beliefs just because they are my personal foibles and idiosyncrasies. The church is not subject to my personal interpretation of the Scriptures. No, I preach and teach according to the standard of the historic Christian faith.

This historic stream is the best way to address new theological ideas and developments. There is always a temptation to assume that what is new is best, and that 'progress' guarantees that we have more perfect understanding than the generations which have gone before. However, it is characteristic of spiritual immaturity to be driven this way and that by the current trends of culture and theology (Eph 4:14). We are to test these new ideas and doctrines, and ask if they resonate with the historic testimony of the church. Are they harmonious with the tradition we have received? We should hesitate and ponder before we embrace the latest theological fads and fashions.

It seems to me that there is also an important practical reason why it is important to maintain that historic tradition today, because it lends credibility to our testimony.

As you know, biblical Christianity is under attack, being described as fundamentalism, in the same breath as fundamentalist Islamic suicide bombers. We are regarded as politically incorrect; socially and culturally aberrant. So it is

⁴ Keith A. Mathison, 'Solo Scriptura: The Difference a Vowel Makes', in: *Modern Reformation*, March/April 2007, Vol. 16 Issue: 2.

⁵ Charles A. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* Vol.1, Ch.5, 6.2.

all the more important to demonstrate that we in fact represent the historic stream of biblical Christian belief. We are not a wacky offshoot of Christianity, born of neo-conservative politics, or the obscurantist thinking of a few anti-intellectual fundamentalists. We are not making it up as we go along. Rather we are in the mainstream.

In the midst of our post-modern culture, there is a longing for what is stable and enduring. There is an appeal to the ancient architecture and traditions of Roman Catholic and Anglican Cathedrals; people want to be 'part of something' which stands secure through the ages. So, who are we as evangelicals? Are we just Johnny-come-latelies, with our theologies hastily drawn up on the back of the nearest envelope? As evangelicals, if we abandon our historic roots and confessions we are in danger of being as out of date as yesterday's newspaper. A confession declares our continuity with historic biblical Christianity.

4. To confess our unity with other believers

The final reason for confessionalism is that it encourages and enhances Christian unity.

When the 1689 Confession was drawn up, the authors deliberately framed their confession around the Westminster Confession of Faith. Clearly these early Particular Baptists were not Presbyterians, and they emphasised their differences especially in the areas of baptism, the

nature of the church and its government, the role of the magistrate, and so on. Yet at the same time they were able to express overwhelming agreement with the WCF in other areas, along with the

Today there is a sense of unity and common purpose with others around the world who subscribe to the Confession.

Congregationalist Confession, the Savoy Declaration. Baptist distinctives are set within the context of substantial agreement with other orthodox believers. So, by subscribing to the 1689 I am confessing profound continuity with the whole broad stream of historic Protestant non-conformity through the centuries.

One of the marks of early Particular Baptist life was the churches' commitment to fellowship with one another. Associations were formed, and messengers from the churches gathered regularly to discuss matters of mutual concern. These Baptists saw that they had an obligation for fellowship, in the same way that an individual believer has an obligation to identify with a local church.

So today there is a sense of unity and common purpose with others around the world who subscribe to the Confession. There is also a sense of substantial unity with all orthodox believers (John 17:21,23). As the Confession states:

'All members of each local church are engaged to pray continually for the good and the prosperity of all churches of Christ, wherever located, and on all occasions to assist all other believers, within the limits of their own areas and callings, in the exercise of their gifts and graces. It follows, therefore, that churches

should seek fellowship one with another, so far as the providence of God provides opportunity for the enjoyment of such benefits' (1689 Confession 26:14).

Questions and Objections

a) *Some say that the 1689 is a child of its time, and is less relevant to the theological and practical issues of today.*

The Confession was written to refute the errors of Socinianism, Roman Catholicism, Quakerism, Arminianism, Antinomianism, and Millenarianism. Many of these errors are still present today, even if some wear different clothes, or are called by different names.

It is difficult to think of any area in which the Confession needs substantial amendment. We may not agree that the Pope is the antichrist, and we can see that such a clause was a result of the particular challenges of the 17th century, but we still see the danger of the false claims of the Pope and the Roman Catholic system.

There are some modern challenges which our forefathers did not face. Should women be elders, or preach? How do we respond to the current gender confusion, including transgenderism? Yet even where the Confession does need to be supplemented, that can be addressed by means of additional statements on specific issues. These might be drawn up in a cooperative way with other like-minded churches. We face those new challenges as we stand on the shoulders of a rich and deep theological tradition.

b) *Is it necessary to subscribe to the whole Confession? What of 'limited subscription'?*

Some say that they can agree with almost all of the 1689 Confession but not all of it. Is the Sabbath defined or applied in the 1689 in a way which we can agree with? Indeed, do we agree with the continued authority of the moral law over Christian believers? When the 1689 speaks of creation in six days, does it mean that literally, or figuratively, or is it just repeating the language of Scripture?

There are essentially two ways of dealing with 'limited subscription'. The first method is to say that you are in broad agreement with the Confession. For example, after a doctrinal controversy in Australia, a draft Declaratory Act was adopted by the Presbyterian churches in Australia in 1901. This 'allowed liberty of conscience in those matters which did not enter into the substance of the faith, and gave the Assembly the right to determine what these matters could be in any given case'.⁶ Similar policies were adopted in Scotland and New Zealand.

The problem here is that essentially you have abandoned a confessional position, and made the whole matter subjective. And as these Presbyterian denominations were gripped by liberal theology, the Declaratory Acts meant that there was no safeguard of confessional standards.

The second approach is to allow disagreement on specific, defined issues. For example, whether the Pope

⁶ Ligon Duncan (ed.), *The Westminster Confession into the 21st century* (Christian Focus), p349.

is the antichrist. I think this is a better approach. However, such concessions should be very limited, and very clearly defined. If concessions begin to multiply, and the implications of each are not carefully considered, then the original Confession has effectively been abandoned.

c) Who should subscribe?

Some Reformed Baptist churches insist that every church member should subscribe to the Confession. In some ways this is an appealing vision of the whole church family united in its convictions. It also fits well with a very 'congregational' view of church government, in the sense of the church members' meeting having final authority in making church decisions.

However, I fear that such an approach is fundamentally flawed. The New Testament clearly expects that the leadership of the church will have a more mature and developed understanding of doctrine and theology than many church members. Elders must be able to teach; they are the ones who are entrusted with the tradition or deposit of truth which is then to be passed on down the generations (Titus 1:9). Deacons are to keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.

The pattern for church members, by contrast, is that they are to be admitted on their conversion, their credible profession of faith and baptism. Are we really to

expect that a new convert will be able to confess the theology of the 1689 on the day he or she comes to Christ? And will we refuse the right hand of fellowship to godly believers from different backgrounds who cannot sign up to all the tenets of Reformed Baptist theology? No, surely not.

My view is that elders and deacons should subscribe to the Confession. They are then united about the preaching and teaching ministry, and the distinctives of the church. When it comes to appointing a new elder, indeed a new pastor, we all know the doctrinal standard which is to be applied. Does he subscribe to the Confession? Are there any areas of disagreement or hesitation? This is a much more substantial basis for discussion than a skeletal basis of faith.

If the leadership is confessional, and the church's position is clear, then we have great confidence in welcoming in new church members from a diversity of backgrounds. It is plain to them from the outset what is the doctrinal position of the church, and what standard of teaching they can expect.

Conclusion

It seems to me that there is a strong case for adoption of the 1689 Confession, both to serve our churches well, and to provide a theological legacy for generations yet to come.

Now we all know that the adoption of a confession of faith, however orthodox,

There is a strong case for adoption of the 1689 Confession, both to serve our churches well, and to provide a theological legacy for generations yet to come.

does not in and of itself guarantee the preservation of doctrinal orthodoxy. We cannot by mechanical means ensure the theological convictions of future generations. And even if we could, what value would there be in preserving doctrinal orthodoxy if there was no spiritual life or vitality? Truth without grace is just as deformed a monster as grace without truth. Of course we also need the fullness of the Spirit; we need zeal and love and godliness as we grow to maturity together in Christ.

Yet we cannot deny that adoption of a confession does provide some safeguard for the future. Negatively we have already observed that the reluctance of Quakers and General Baptists to adopt substantial confessions of faith was a key factor in their doctrinal decline. There was no safeguard against the advance of mysticism and subjectivism, and no defence against false teaching. The church becomes like a body without an immune system, where error cannot be recognised, or easily refuted.

Positively, a good confession lays foundations for future doctrinal reformation. We can reflect on the recent doctrinal revival in the Southern Baptist denomination, not least at SBTS under the leadership of Al Mohler. His appointment as President of the Seminary was based on the conviction of

TRUTH WITHOUT GRACE IS JUST AS DEFORMED A MONSTER AS GRACE WITHOUT TRUTH.

the Trustees that they needed to return the Seminary to the Confession of Faith instituted by the founders.

At present we are enjoying a revival of interest in Reformed theology in evangelical circles. Now is the time to

articulate our convictions, and to teach and train leaders for the future according to the doctrinal standards of our Confession.

I close with the words of American Baptist historian Henry Vedder, who speaks of the publication of the 1689 Confession by the Philadelphia Association in 1742 like this:

"The publication ... of a strongly Calvinistic Confession in 1742 was a turning-point in the history of American Baptists, as it insured the prevalence of that type of theology. Up to this time the Arminian Baptists had been the stronger in New England, and the colonies of New York and New Jersey, and it was at one time probable that they would control the development of the denomination. It was the Philadelphia Association that turned the tide and decided the course of American Baptist history."⁷ ■

Bill James is Pastor of Emmanuel Evangelical Church, Leamington Spa, UK.

⁷ Quoted from Wayne Mack in Erroll Hulse (ed.) *The Ideal Church* (1972), p55.



ROBERT OLIVER

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

A Plea for Reformation Identity

The Protestant Reformation was occasioned by a glorious recovery of the gospel. In the wake of its renewed understanding of the way of salvation, the nature and purpose of the sacraments came under intense scrutiny. Since the Medieval Church's distorted teachings on salvation were heavily dependent on its understanding of the sacraments this was not surprising. Careful study of the New Testament by a group of believers in Switzerland led them to the conviction that baptism should only

be administered to believers. Since infant baptism incorporated babies into the 'Christian state' as well as into the church, any challenges to the prevalent practice were mistakenly perceived to be a challenge to the very structure of society as well as that of the church. Both the teaching and practice of believers' baptism were therefore opposed by magistrates as well as by churchmen. Those who taught believers' baptism were quickly dubbed 'Anabaptists', a title they did not accept, since the term means

'rebaptizers', whereas they themselves did not believe infant baptism to be a valid form of baptism. They were happier to be described as Baptists.

I. Baptists in England

1. General Baptists

In the 17th century two distinct groups of Baptists emerged in England. The first group was directly influenced by developments on the mainland of Europe. It was composed of English Christians who had accepted exile in the later years of Elizabeth I (1558 – 1603), because of their conviction that the church must be free to organise itself on biblical lines without interference by the state. The government of Elizabeth I considered that their beliefs were divisive and dangerous. It was as refugees in the Netherlands that some of these men came to the conclusion that a free independent church of believers must limit baptism to those who gave credible evidence of faith in Christ. There was however a less happy development among them at about the same time. Around them new challenges to the Reformers' teachings were being promoted by a group known as Arminians from the name of one of their first teachers, Jacobus Arminius. Doctrines asserting conditional election to salvation and the free will of sinful man and his ability to respond to the gospel were being widely discussed. Sadly these doctrines were accepted by the Baptists, who thereby were moving themselves away from Reformation teachings on grace. Led by Thomas Helwys a group of these Arminian Baptists decided in 1612 to risk a return to England. There in the London suburb of Spitalfields they formed themselves into a church. In spite of

opposition from the authorities they took root, expanding to plant other churches. Their Arminian teachings as well as their church principles isolated them from the growing Puritan movement in the country.

2. Particular Baptists

Independency was also increasing in England as well as among exiles on the Continent. In the 1630s it was evident that amongst the Calvinistic Independents there were Baptists who retained their belief in the Calvinistic doctrines of grace. Apart from their conviction about baptism they accepted the main teachings of Reformed theology on salvation.

Their first identifiable church in the London area appeared in Southwark in 1633. By 1644 there were seven such churches in the London area as well as a number in the country. By that time the country had been plunged into a civil war between the parties of King and Parliament. In the general confusion old persecuting laws were relaxed and a wide variety of religious sects emerged. It was the general confusion and opposition that led the Calvinistic Baptists to clarify their position and to make it clear to others what their beliefs were, and the reasons for their faith. So the seven churches in London agreed on a Confession of Faith, distancing themselves from the Continental Anabaptists as well as from the English Arminian Baptists. Because of their belief in particular redemption they soon became known as Particular Baptists, while the Arminians were called General Baptists. Differences on matters central to the doctrine of salvation inevitably led to two different and distinct groups of Baptists.

II. The Second London Confession of Faith, 1677/ 1689

Later in the 17th century the Particular Baptists decided that it would be beneficial to issue a new Confession of Faith. It was not because their beliefs had changed, but they had to some extent deepened and there were new challenges. Some of their churches lost members to the Quakers who promoted belief in the possibility of subjective personal revelation beside the objective truth of the Bible. There were also attempts to achieve a compromise between Arminianism and Calvinism. Some of these appeared to be attractive, but on closer examination they were shown to compromise the gospel itself. Christians needed to be safeguarded against such errors. Further, since the First London Confession had been published there had appeared two fine statements of Christian doctrine.

There was the Westminster Confession of Faith composed by an Assembly of Divines in 1646 and approved by Parliament in 1648. It was adopted by English and Scottish Presbyterians. A few years later the Independents modified this and issued their own version as the Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order, 1658. This was mainly a modification of the Westminster Confession to take account of Independent church order. In the 1670s the Baptists further edited these two statements to take account of their convictions on believers' baptism. They were also concerned to emphasise as far as they could 'our hearty agreement with them in that wholesome Protestant doctrine, which with so clear evidence of Scripture they

have asserted'. This Baptist Confession drawn up in 1677 was approved and commended by an Assembly of Particular Baptist Churches in 1689 and is usually known as the 1689 Confession or the Second London Confession. By the end of the 17th century two clearly defined groups of Baptist churches existed. For the Particular Baptists the Confession

It was not sufficient for Reformed Christians to be known simply as Evangelicals.

remains a useful summary of what Particular Baptist churches have taught and believed for over 300 years. It demonstrated that the churches that accepted it adhered to the great Reformation teachings on God, Scripture and the way of salvation. There were several reprints in the following century proclaiming the Particular Baptists' continued allegiance to the Reformed faith

in a time of considerable theological flux.

It was in a historic Particular Baptist church that C H Spurgeon began his notable London ministry in 1854 and from this church he re-issued the 1689 Confession. At that time many Christian people still understood that the Particular Baptists were Calvinistic. Sadly by the middle of the 20th century such doctrinal understanding had almost disappeared among English Evangelicals.

III. A Twentieth-Century Recovery

From the 1950s onwards there was a remarkable and unexpected recovery of Calvinistic teaching among Evangelicals. This development owed much to the ministry of Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a revived interest in Puritan theology and the republication of classic Reformed books by the *Banner of Truth Trust* and

other publishers. By this time the term 'Particular Baptist' was almost forgotten and often misunderstood. A new description was needed in the changing situation. Some brethren believed that the emphasis on Calvinistic teaching and the practice of believers' baptism was divisive when there was need for Evangelical unity. There was and still is need for co-operation with fellow believers, but over against this many considered that the Particular Baptist heritage was too valuable to be forgotten. They were thankful to identify with the Confession and to acknowledge themselves as Confessional Baptists. It was not enough to be known simply as Baptists.

Sadly a considerable number of erstwhile Particular Baptist churches had already succumbed to decisionist Arminianism while others in the 1970s and after were drawn towards the developing charismatic movement or to forms of worship influenced by it. There was a strong case for Confessional Baptists who wished to preserve what was valuable in their heritage to describe themselves as Reformed Baptists. This linked them with the Reformation and its teachings.

IV. Evangelical is not enough

The name 'Evangelical' has an honourable history going back at least to William Tyndale (c.1494-1536) who described himself and his associates as Evangelicals or gospel men. By the end of the 20th century the term was being widely used but often by those who had little or no

understanding of William Tyndale's gospel. It was not sufficient for Reformed Christians to be known simply as Evangelicals. Some in the mass media used the word 'Evangelical' mistakenly for 'evangelistic' and by extension it came to mean 'zealous in promoting a cause', sometimes even a political cause or some form of social change. When it was used

IT SEEMS WISE FOR CONFESSATIONAL BAPTISTS TO EMBRACE THE DESCRIPTION REFORMED BAPTISTS.

in a religious sense it was a term so broad as to become almost meaningless. It could embrace charismatic practices and beliefs as well as orthodox Protestant Christianity. For many it has come to represent a noisy mindless form of religion far removed from the beliefs of many who previously accepted it as an honourable title.

In such a situation it seems wise for Confessional Baptists to embrace the description 'Reformed Baptists' and to ensure that we and our friends understand it. There are those who object that the unchurched masses that we long to reach with the gospel have no idea of its meaning. Such an objection carries little weight since the title itself provides an opportunity to assert and explain the convictions that our fathers promoted in the 1689 Confession, pointing out that under God these doctrines have sustained a group of churches for over 300 years. They identify us with the Puritans and the Reformers before them. ■

Robert Oliver is a Reformed Baptist Pastor and historian

Celebrating the Reformation

JOHN PALMER

Are you going to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation? No, that's the wrong question. How are you going to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation? Surely all true Christians should. Certainly those who subscribe to a magazine called *Reformation Today* should! On 31st October next year it will be 500 years since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg and thus – unwittingly, but under God – began the recovery of the knowledge of the true gospel which we rejoice is now being preached all over the world.

Here is a proposal. In every country with a Christian heritage, those who are able to do so could arrange a series of talks throughout the land, to be held on or near 'Reformation Day' 2017, where competent and enthusiastic speakers could explain what happened on that day, in its context, and its implications for today. Then this could be done for other great events connected with the Reformation, in Germany and elsewhere; for example, the Diet of Worms, William Tyndale's resolve to translate the Scriptures, the conversion of key figures like Calvin or Latimer, etc. These could be publicised as widely as possible, not only in Christian contexts but in the secular media. So that over a number of years, the great work of God which the Reformation was, and the great truths discovered afresh in time, could be declared and explained.

The purpose would be twofold. First, to inform about God's love and blessing in bringing about the deliverance from false into true gospel teaching, and thus

inspire believers to love and live by these precious truths afresh. Some Christians have no interest in church history at all – they don't see the relevance of it to them. This is not helped in cultures where all knowledge of history is being eroded or deformed. Other Christians have a vague interest in church history but little knowledge. This needs to be remedied.

Secondly, to challenge the secularism, false religions, and multi-culturalism which prevail in many countries. Most are ignorant of the gospel, and Christ and his church are derided everywhere. There are concentrated attempts by the elites of many nations to undo all the blessings which the Reformation brought in terms of truth and righteousness. The next few years give us an unrepeatable opportunity, which we should grasp, to declare the immense benefits which the Reformation has brought to those cultures where it had an influence, and the dangers and indeed tragedy of turning from and ignoring these gospel truths. This is not because a course of history lectures will change the course of history! Rather, it is that we as God's witnesses should boldly declare him and his gospel and working in history for his glory – even if all we get in response is hatred and derision.

The need would be for those of influence in that part of the church in each nation which values the Reformation to co-ordinate such a programme of lectures. If this is to be done, planning needs to begin soon. Let us not miss this God-given opportunity again to proclaim the difference between darkness and light. ■



Uganda (1)

Bosco Bukeera sent the following report of his calling and plans for ministry in Uganda:

My wife and I were working with former street kids with an organisation called African Hearts Community Organisation forty minutes north of the capital Kampala. These children end up on the streets for many reasons from abuse to loss of parents, getting involved in drug abuse and other nasty activities. Our work was to identify them on the streets, bring them to our homes for rehabilitation and afterwards find their extended families and resettle them back. Most times resettlement didn't work out because of the poverty conditions or single-parent issues and a number of other reasons. My heart broke as I saw these children being rejected by their family and thought about the plan of God in Genesis chapter two. That's part of the reason which sparked my pursuing further training so that we may teach God's intention for family and to teach that children are a gift and not a burden.

The second reason is, of course, the sweep of the health and wealth gospel. The church in Uganda is under that attack of selfish pastors who preach for their selfish gain. You can't but grieve for the people who have lost their property through giving to the church, trusting that the God the pastors told them about would give them more than they have given. The Lord described them aright, 'They eat the fat

and clothe themselves with the wool; they slaughter the fatlings, but they do not feed the flock' (Ezek 34:3). It is now the battle we want to engage in so we may try and save some, yet not we but the Lord working through us.

So I am currently doing an apprenticeship with Milnrow Evangelical Church in Rochdale until September. Then I will move to another church to do the same programme with the pastor at Three Bridges Free Church in Crawley. After a year there we will return to Uganda and start the work. Our first aim is to be grounded in Reformed theology and see it in practice here and compare it with the church in Uganda to know what we could do differently until the nets are full.

 *Bosco and Heidi Bukeera*



Uganda (2)

Pastor Eric Ngala Mutumbi from Bumala, Kenya (see also RT 270) has recently travelled to several other African countries. The following is based on his report:

Pastor Ngala is actively pursuing reaching neighbourhoods with the gospel. This also includes tent-making activities which are often necessary in Africa. He started work in Uganda where he trains a small group of pastors in theology and biblical counselling. This is in eastern Uganda in a place called Bulwenge where he works with local leaders under a pastor called Gilbert Ojiambo of Africa Inland Church International.

Pastor Ngala has also been a visiting teacher at the African Bible University every semester for three weeks to teach the students on 'Farming God's Way' and also to share the gospel whenever opportunities arise to preach in the chapel as well as in churches in Kampala. He did this for five years until May 2015 when resources became scarce. Pray that the Lord will provide so that this ministry can be resumed.

Democratic Republic of Congo

Pastor Ngala visited this country in August 2015. He was hosted by the United Reformed Church of Congo with a number of churches in Congo. The purpose of the visit was not only to preach and teach, but also to use the opportunity to speak to a group of church leaders in Kinshasa, Mbuji-Mayi and Bena-Kazadi. Another purpose of the visit was to empower the churches by teaching 'Farming God's Way' focusing especially on poultry production.

Pastor Ngala writes about his experiences in Congo:

'This visit opened my eyes to what real mission fields look like in a practical sense. The need for the gospel is enormous in the rural areas like Mbuji-Mayi and Bena-Kazadi which I visited and where I spent time with the local people in their needy situation. Rev Kabongo has already




 Church audience in Congo

begun to train a group of pastors using the Mukhanyo Distance Learning materials but the obstacles were too many and not much progress has been made. There are great needs for such studies in this vast country, maybe a school in Kinshasa, Katanga, Kasai Province and even in the neighbouring areas of the Congo forest among the pygmy people! I thank God that one of the graduates of African Bible University is

working with the pygmies in the forest.

'Human suffering is very high; girl children are hard hit and are given for marriage at 12 years of age! It is not uncommon to find a boy of 18 years who does not know even how to write his name! If the Lord provides, I am willing to go back in 2016 to follow up on the community action plan which we had agreed on with the people. There is need for some certified seed for crop production as the people use local seeds



 Pastor Ngala preaching in Congo, translated by Pastor Kabongo

which do not give good yields although the soil looks very fertile. Here is a real mission field!

Southern Sudan

This is an area which we have been praying about for some time. The need to reach the population with the gospel is vast and the workers are few. Our strategy has been to organise 20 churches to set up a team to pray for mission work in Africa and to commit a small amount of money each Sunday for missions. This fund is intended to be used in sending one or two persons from each of the 20 churches to the mission field. This idea was born after a training we had led by Dr Combs in Uganda at the International Training and Equipping Ministry (ITEM) and his courtesy call recently in Bumala where he



 Poultry farming

spoke to the 20 pastors (December 2015). Pray with us that this may be fruitful.

Latest news from Fiji

The Fiji islands recently have been badly hit by cyclone Winston with a death toll of 45. We have obtained news from Pastor Vijay Chandra. They are well and in good health, yet heartbroken about the devastation

wreaked by this cyclone. Six people from the church families have had parts of their homes blown off and severely damaged. Please pray for pastor Vijay and his wife Narsamma and for their ministry in Fiji.

London Theological Seminary: John Owen Centre

*The following is an extract from a recent newsletter
by Dr Garry Williams and an announcement:*

Expanding the team

The John Owen Centre is delighted to announce the appointment of the Revd Dr Flavien Pardigon as its first Tutor in Biblical Studies. His role will involve offering Study Days for pastors around the country in Biblical Studies, and supervising pastors who are on Study Projects focusing on biblical topics. In due course we hope that he will be involved in overseeing new formal courses in Biblical Studies that we hope to offer. He will also write and publish.

Flavien is French and completed his undergraduate and Master's studies at Faculté Libre de Théologie Réformée (Aix-en-Provence). His PhD at Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) was a combination of exegetical and theological work on Acts 17. Flavien is thus a doctrinally alert New Testament specialist with a particular focus on researching Luke's writings.

Flavien has served the body of Christ in various parts of the majority world. His current ministry, which will continue in tandem with his work at the John Owen Centre, is focused on West Africa and South-east Asia. It involves helping to develop and mature indigenous Reformed church bodies through partnering with local Christians and training leaders.

Flavien has served as a lecturer in many seminaries around the world, and serves as a PhD supervisor at the Faculté Jean Calvin (Aix-en-Provence, France). Flavien is married to Inyange and they have five children. They are members of Cambridge Presbyterian Church.

Conference: 'Putting Theology Back into Practice: Through the Lens of Melchizedek'

Flavien Pardigon will give the first two papers at our next conference, which is all on Melchizedek. We plan to demonstrate that Melchizedek is a thoroughly practical subject, as the main title suggests. I hope that the list of papers speaks for itself:

- » Melchizedek in Genesis, Psalm 110, and Hebrews – Flavien Pardigon
- » Melchizedek: A Hermeneutical Manifesto – Flavien Pardigon
- » Paying Tithes in Abram: Realism and Original Sin – Garry Williams
- » John Owen on the Priesthood of Christ – Benedict Bird
- » The Kingly Office of Christ – Andrew Kerr
- » The King of Righteousness for Ministers – Jeremy Walker

Do come and join us on 12 – 13 September. You can book now by emailing: johnowen@ltslondon.org. ■

STANDING TALL in Troubled Times

The text below is a letter from Pastor Roland Eskinazi to the members of the International Baptist Church in Brussels following the terrorist attacks on 22 March.

Dear IBC Family

What a week! The terror attacks have come so close to home. We have seen and are seeing devastating images of familiar places where many of us have stood several times. Some of us are still reeling in shock perhaps. Wondering if this is just the beginning of something worse? Others are being inundated with messages from family and friends. Lord, we ask – how should we respond? Allow me to encourage you as I do myself with the following:

Be thankful – but not insensitive

I have heard some amazing stories of God's protection over this time. A couple from our church were not more than three to five

meters away from one of the bomb blasts. Those next to them died. They have escaped with pierced ears, head cuts and burns. They told me today that the Lord gave them an amazing sense of his peace and presence to comfort others directly afterwards. There are other stories that some of you have, such as some of our Home Schooling Co-op children, normally in the church building on a Tuesday. This week they were out on a day trip to visit the European Parliament. One family at least missed the Maalbeek bomb by a matter of minutes. As we rejoice in God's protection, do pray for those not as fortunate.

Remember all families torn apart by this, and many who will live with permanent disabilities as a result.

Be responsible – but not fearful

It is no secret that the Jihadists who perpetrate such despicable deeds want us to be driven to fear. As we prayed as elders together for each of you on Tuesday evening and ourselves we prayed that like Paul in Philippians 4 we would have wisdom to know the difference between legitimate concern for safety – and being sinfully anxious which would show a lack of faith in God. These are not easy waters to navigate, are they? The Psalms make that clear. But let us remember, as we read in Psalm 75:3 ‘When the earth and all its people quake, it is I (the Lord) who hold its pillars firm’. So let us not be flippant or careless. But let us not be driven into a paralytic fear that denies the message of the Christ who assures us that we will not be severed from his love, whatever we face in life, and especially in death!

Easter Sunday is coming – good can come out of the worst evil!

This is Passion week. Let us not forget that Good Friday could not be called good, if it were not bad first! Could there be anything more evil or more unjust than sinners putting to death the only man who can truly be called innocent? This same man did not avoid the Cross. He endured the sufferings, the abuse and the injustice, not because he was a victim. It was not just our sins that held him to the cross, it was his love for us. Without the worst evil in the world, greater even than all evil through all generations, there would be no hope, no forgiveness, no salvation – no gladness in God!

Do we really believe that? Are you like me already seeing some good come out of this? In your own life as you think of

eternity? In the love and concern that draws previously divided people together? In this nation of Belgium where we are called to be witnesses? This is a time to be expectant. A time to share the love of Christ. A time to lay hold of God, to pray like never before and to ask him to be merciful. Why should the events of this week as terrible as they are not lead to the spiritual awakening of many and to revival in the church? Why should it not lead to godly perspective when we begin to focus on what really matters? The light always shines brightest, does it not – when the night is at its darkest!

Remember... troubling times are times to praise God, to live courageously and to be all the Lord has called us to be. I am available for any counsel, or even if you need a listening ear.

In the love of Christ, our all-sufficient Saviour and Lord

Pastor Roland. ■



An overview of recent conferences is as follows:

FEBRUARY

| COUNTRY | LOCATION | DELEGATES | NO. BOOKS Sold & Free |
|--------------|---------------|------------|-----------------------|
| South Africa | Eldorado Park | 22 | 197 |
| | Tembisa | 36 | 622 |
| | Welkom | 45 | 613 |
| Total | | 103 | 1432 |

MARCH

| COUNTRY | LOCATION | DELEGATES | NO. BOOKS Sold & Free |
|--------------|----------------|------------|-----------------------|
| Zimbabwe | Victoria Falls | 28 | 315 |
| Zambia | Livingstone | 61 | 678 |
| Botswana | Mazabuka | 51 | 670 |
| Botswana | Gaborone | 41 | 799 |
| Total | | 181 | 2462 |

Upcoming Conferences:

| Date | Town/City | Country | Speakers | Theme |
|-------------|-----------|----------|---|--|
| April 4-8 | Abuja | Nigeria | Andy McIntosh (UK) and Irving Steggles (RSA). | ‘Creation and New Creation’. |
| April 7-8 | Bulawayo | Zimbabwe | Michael Bwembya | ‘Christ building his church in Africa today’ |
| April 11-12 | Kwekwe | Zimbabwe | (Zambia) will speak at these conferences. | |
| April 14-15 | Harare | Zimbabwe | | |

In May the conferences will be in the eastern part of South Africa and Swaziland. At the time of preparing the text for this issue of *RT*, APC Director Pastor Irving Steggles was not well. Please pray for these conferences and for Irving Steggles. The work of APC has now been without a Conference Manager for seven months, which puts an additional work burden on Irving Steggles (Director) and Gayle Staegemann (Bookroom Manager). Please pray that God will raise up a suitable man for this vital position.

Note: Eldorado Park was a one-day conference, not the usual two days. It is situated on the outskirts of Soweto township. Tembisa (previously held at Ora et Labora then Kempton Park) is the oldest APC conference. APC Director Pastor Irving Steggles is the organiser. He gave an additional, helpful talk on the ordinances – the Lord’s Supper and Baptism. Although the number of delegates is not large, many of the pastors who have regularly attended over the years have greatly benefited from the talks and books and are coming to a Reformed position. Follow-up conferences are sorely needed at all the APC venues. At present, these occur only at Welkom and Estcourt where they have been sponsored. The conferences in Victoria falls and Mazabuka were new APCs. The number of delegates attending each of these was encouraging. Also encouraging was the increase in the number of delegates in Gaborone as well as the good book sales there. God has once again blessed the ministry of APC.

New Books

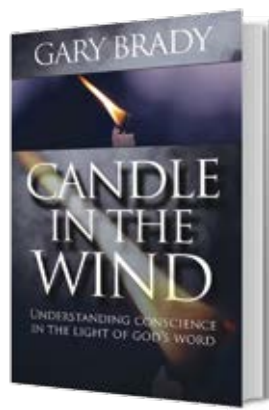
We want to draw your attention to some important new books:

Gary Brady, *Candle in the Wind. Understanding Conscience in the Light of God's Word*

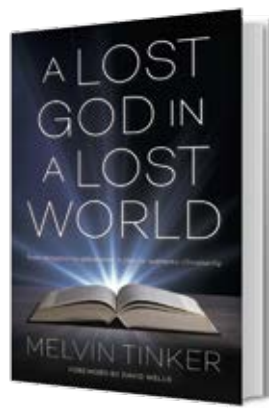
The following is a quote from the review of this book by Paul Wells in Evangelical Times: *'I enjoyed everything about this book. It is a great read on an issue seldom addressed in recent years. Perhaps the absence of books (as well as preaching) on this subject is the reason why some evangelicals have a superficial view of the uses of conscience, and are reticent regarding the function of divine law in the Christian life. Be that as it may, reading Gary Brady's book will do anyone the world of good. It is a page-turner; a mine of information, filled with wisdom from the Puritans and beyond, as well as being biblical and pastoral, to boot.'*

- Mark Dever, Jonathan Leeman, *Baptist foundations: church government in an anti-institutional age* (B&H Academic), ISBN 978-1-43368-104-2
- Melvin Tinker, *A lost God in a lost world* (EP Books), ISBN 978-1-78397-122-0
- Jim Thompson, *Healing and healers today* (EP Books), ISBN 978-0-85234-933-5 (reprint)
- Sharon James, *Ann Judson. A Missionary Life for Burma* (EP Books), ISBN 978-1-85234-916-8 (reprint)
- R L Plummer, M D Haste, *Held in Honor: wisdom for your marriage from voices of the past* (Christian Focus Publications), ISBN 978-1-78191-643-8
- Iain Campbell, *A Christian's pocket guide to sin* (Christian focus Publications), ISBN 978-1-78191-647-6

Please, notice that we are not able to supply these books; please consult your own bookshop.



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Please make any cheques out to 'Reformation Today'.

Donations to APC: These should be sent to Phil Roberts, 121 Hartshill Road, Hartshill, Stoke-on-Trent, ST4 7LU. Cheques should be made out to 'African Pastors' Conferences'. Could UK donors please let Phil Roberts know if they intend to use gift aid.



Further Details

Further details about individual APC conferences are available from Phil Roberts (phil@tentmaker.org.uk) or Frederick Hodgson (frederick.hodgson@gmail.com)

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Theme: The Last Things

▶ The Doctrine of the Last Things
(Mostyn Roberts)

▶ The Holy Spirit Gives Life
(Keith Noldt)