

BY COMMON CONFESSION:
What a Confessional Church Is, and Why It's Good to Be One!
(1 Timothy 3:14-16)

I. WELCOME / TEXT / PRAYER

A. Welcome

B. Today's Text:

¹⁴ I am hoping to come to you speedily; ¹⁵ but in case I am delayed, I am writing these things to you so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth. ¹⁶ And by common confession, great is the mystery of *true* godliness: He was manifested in *the* flesh, vindicated by *the* Spirit, beheld by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

C. Opening Prayer

II. INTRODUCTION

A. Today's Special Church Family Meeting: to discuss Part 1 of a proposed Constitution for IBC: 1) Statement of Faith, 2) Positions on Current Ethical Issues Affecting the Church, and 3) Church Covenant (HSL)

B. If you've been here awhile, if you know the old IBC (Immanuel Baptist Church) constitution, and if you've read the new one we are recommending, you know one thing: It's WAY DIFFERENT from what you're used to: It's detailed, it occasionally uses big words, and it's LONG! *And you're saying to yourself, "What's going on here? When they started talking about a new constitution, I thought maybe they would tweak the old one just a bit. But this is something radically new! Is this constitution going to turn IBC into something it's not and never has been????"*

C. My purpose in today's message:

- To answer these questions
- To address these fears
- To communicate our vision for an IBC that is indeed somewhat different, but which we also believe will be a LOT more stable, peaceful, healthy, growing, and filled with the presence of God!

D. What we currently are: a *minimally* confessional church

E. What we hope to see IBC become: a *robustly* confessional church!

F. To explain all this, I'll use my time this morning to address three important questions:

- What is a confessional church? Robust, minimal?
- Is there Scriptural support for shooting to become a confessional church?
- What are the advantages of being a confessional church?

III. WHAT IS A CONFESSIONAL CHURCH?

A. To better understand the word “confession,” let’s look at today’s text: (HSL)

¹⁴ I am hoping to come to you speedily; ¹⁵ but in case I am delayed, I am writing these things to you so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is 1) *the church of the living God*, 2) *the pillar and support⁶ of the truth*. 3) ¹⁶ *And by common confession, great is the mystery of true godliness: 4) He⁸ was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, beheld by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.*

B. Focus: “By common confession”

- From *homologeō*, meaning “to say the same thing; agree”
- Net Bible: “And we all agree, our religion contains an amazing revelation.”

MP: Even back in NT times, the apostles and teachers developed short summaries of the gist of the Christian faith; summaries that the people could memorize and “confess” together at a worship service, or, if necessary, before a governor or emperor!

C. Historically, Christian leaders have always felt the need to produce such brief summaries, as aids for teaching the people and helping them get to the heart of the faith.

- Related terms: *Creeds, catechisms, confessions*
- Early Creeds: The Apostle’s Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed
- Reformation Confessions: Augsburg Confession (Lutheran), 39 Articles (Anglican), Belgic Confession, **WCF**, Heidelberg Catechism (P and R)
- English Confessions: **LBC** (1689), Philadelphia Confession, **New Hampshire Baptist Confession** (1833), Baptist Faith and Message (1966, etc.), Cambridge Declaration (1996, P, R, B: A call to repent and return!)

D. Definition: *A confessional church is a church that agrees on a particular understanding of the message of the Bible, summarizes this understanding in a Statement of Faith (and Church Covenant), requires its ministers to hold to this Statement (i.e., confess it), and encourages all of its members to do the same.*

E. Further Definition: *A Minimally Confessional church addresses fewer biblical doctrines in less detail; a Robustly Confessional church addresses more in greater detail.*

F. The Question You’re All Asking: Who gets to decide on the Particular Understanding of the Bible that winds up in the Statement of Faith?

- The cultist's answer: **I** do
- The wise church leader's answer: **WE** do (God, the collective wisdom of the Church contained in its historic creeds and confessions, and the leaders of the local church in constant consultation with the people)
- Note: The Wisdom of standing on the shoulders of our evangelical predecessors (e.g., of the Maserati and the go cart) **(Slide)**

G. Important cautionary words about the use of Confessions of Faith

- Because good ones embody the collective wisdom of the Church down through the centuries, they can be extremely valuable (more later)
- But they are never of equal authority with Holy Scripture

The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible¹ rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience . . . LBC- First Sentence!

"This little volume (LBC) is not issued as an authoritative rule, or code of faith, whereby you are to be fettered, but as an assistance to you in controversy, a confirmation in faith, and a means of edification in righteousness. Here the younger members of our church will have a body of divinity in small compass, and by means of Scriptural proofs, will be ready to give an account for the hope that is in them . . . Above all, live in Christ Jesus, and walk in Him, giving credence to no teaching but that which is manifestly approved by Him and owned by the Holy Spirit. Cleave fast to the Word of God, which is here mapped out for you." – Charles Spurgeon

- They can, and should be, amended and supplemented as God gives further light on his Word

II. IS THERE SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT FOR SHOOTING TO BECOME A CONFSSIONAL CHURCH?

A. 1 Tim. 3: By Common Confession . . .

B. Other NT texts that point to a core of NT truth, able to be summarized and passed along the other disciples, whether new Christians or potential leaders:

- Now I praise you because you remember me in all things, and hold fast to *the traditions* just as I delivered *them* to you. – 1 Cor. 11:2
- Therefore, brothers, stand fast and hold firmly to *the traditions* that you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us. – 2 Thess. 3:13f
- Let him who is taught *the word* share in all good things with him who teaches. – Gal. 6:6
- But thanks be to God, *though you once* were slaves of sin, you obeyed from the heart that *form of teaching* to which you were entrusted. --Rom. 6:7

- If anyone is teaching a different doctrine, and does not assent to *sound words* (those of our Lord Jesus Christ) and to *the doctrine that accords with godliness*, he is puffed up *and* understands nothing . . . 1 Tim. 3
- Hold closely to *the pattern of sound words* that you have heard from me, in *the* faith and love that are *found* in Christ Jesus
- And the things you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, pass these along to trustworthy men who will be able to instruct others as well. – 2 Tim. 2:2

MP: *In a robust confession of faith, Christian leaders make an effort to summarize, in as much detail as they think necessary, all the holy traditions, doctrines, and sound words that make for a well-rounded biblical faith and practice, and a healthy church.*

C. Two more beautiful texts I especially like, picturing the importance of having a confession of faith:

- The Sheepfold of John 10
- The Rock of Mt. 7: “Therefore whoever hears these words of Mine and puts them into practice, he may be likened to a wise man who built his house upon the rock. And the rains came down, the streams arose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, for it was founded upon the rock.”

IV. WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING A CONFSSIONAL CHURCH?

A. Unity

- Among ourselves

Now I plead with you, brothers, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and *that* there be no schisms among you, but *that* you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. --1 Cor. 1:11

Note: Thomas Campbell: “No Creed but Christ, no Book but the Bible” (He said creeds divide)

Note: B. H. Carol: A Robust Confession of Faith tends towards greater unity (he said they unite)

- With other like-minded churches (e.g., Sovereign Grace, First Baptist Windsor, Sonoma First Baptist, CFF, MH, Founders Ministry churches, Reformed Baptist churches, etc.)

B. Continuity / Stability

- Links us with the faith of our evangelical and Baptist forefathers

- Ensures that future leaders will hold to it as well

C. Growth

- Attracts thoughtful new members and leaders
- Serves as a teaching tool

D. Purity

- Rebuffs wolves in sheep's clothing, both members and would-be leaders
- Provides a baseline for church discipline

E. Prophetic Power (Pillar and Support of the Truth; the Light of the World, a City Set on a Hill)

F. Safety / Security / Peace / Presence

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. ² He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters. ³ He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. ⁴ Even if I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. ⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows. ⁶ Surely goodness and loving-kindness will follow me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

V. CONCLUSION: WHAT THE BAPTIST LEADERS AT THE FOUNDERS MINISTRIES KNOW

A. What is the Founder's Ministries?

B. What the leaders there know:

- In modern times, a flood has been unleashed (Rev. 12)
- In the last 20 years, it has swept away whole denominations
- It almost swept away the SBC
- It's only gonna get worse
- The only way to survive it is to go back to the philosophy of the Founders of the Baptist movement, who believed in—and wrote—robust Confessions of Faith and Practice, in order to keep God's people and their churches strong, safe, powerful, and effective in their generation

C. Here at IBC, the choice is now before you; and the choice is yours