

Why Creeds & Confessions?

Shortly after we moved to Summerville, a couple of Jehovah's Witnesses showed up at our door. Two ladies, humbly dressed and smiling, gave a presentation from [Psalm 37](#). The thesis of their speech was from verse 29 that "the righteous will inherit the land" ([v. 29](#)). If we seek good for our neighbors, we will be righteous and live forever, they said. After they finished, I asked to hold one of their bibles (they were holding NIV's, not the NWT you would usually see) and opened it to [Ephesians 2](#), "*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast*" ([vv. 8-9](#)).

I told them, "you're telling me that if I'm a good person, I will live forever, but that's not what the Bible says." I tried to persuade them that not only is what they're saying unbiblical, but that they are endangering their souls and the people they share their presentation with. The older of the two ladies, with a confused look said, "How can we be doing something wrong if we're doing it for the Bible?"

Herein lies the problem. The Bible is our source of truth, but what happens when somebody else makes claims contrary to scripture while assuring everyone they believe the Bible too? How can the true believers of Christ and scripture differentiate themselves from not only other believers who may have errant beliefs, but pseudo-christian religions like Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons who also claim the bible as their own?

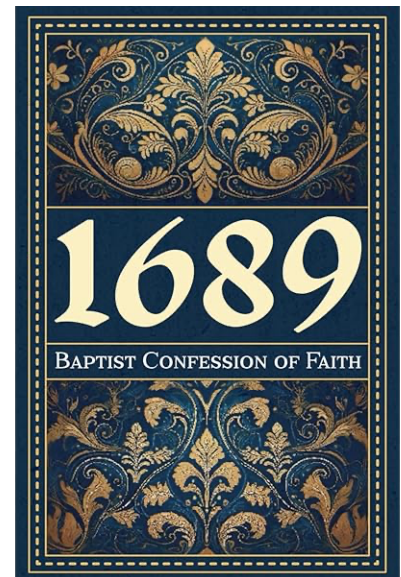
Creeds & Confessions Address Controversies of their Time

There is some debate over which one came first, but the first well-established confession is the Nicene Creed, written in 325. At the time, there was a man named Arius, a priest in Alexandria, Egypt, who taught that Jesus was created and not co-eternal with the Father. His popularity accelerated in the ancient church as he was a musician and wrote catchy songs to go along with his heresy. The controversy grew so much it led to the emperor, Constantine, calling a meeting of all the bishops and overseers of the Roman Empire to address it. At this council, the controversy led to the Nicene Creed and an important clarification on Christ's eternal nature and essence:

*I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,
begotten, not made, **consubstantial** with the Father;
through him all things were made.*

When the Nicene Council gathered, they realized they had a big problem. As they would start to say things they believed from the scriptures, Arius would tell them he agreed. Then, when he would start to say what he believed using the same terminology, they realized they needed a word he could not claim to believe. They needed something specific to address Arius's heresy, so they used the word "Homoousious." That is the word "consubstantial" in the creed above and it means something is of the same substance or essence. It is a way of clearly stating the Son is co-eternal and co-equal with the Father.

This same pattern repeats itself throughout history with creeds and confessions. Somebody attempts to contradict God's word, then God's people respond with a written document to clarify what the scriptures teach. We benefit greatly from being in the time we are in, because many issues that could have arisen have already been dealt with by faithful Christians before us.



The First London Baptist Confession

A significant chunk of our time this morning will be dedicated to the First London Baptist Confession (LBC) because the occasion for the first is very similar to the second, though we will talk about both. The first LBC was originally published in 1644 and then again in 1646 with some revisions. At the time, various Protestant denominations were popping up: Particular (Calvinistic) Baptists, General Baptists, Anabaptists, Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Mennonites, to name a few. Denominations were all attempting to distinguish themselves from others, but for the authors of the first LBC, this was especially true of Anabaptists. The confession opens with:

A confession of faith of seven congregations or churches of Christ in London, which are commonly, but unjustly called Anabaptists; published for the vindication of the truth and information of the ignorant;

The Anabaptists had grown a reputation for being anarchists and were, in the eyes of Calvin and Luther, heretics. Some of their reasoning for believing they were heretics included some doctrine our church would hold to, like credobaptism, but they were also staunch arminians with a strong emphasis on man's free will in choosing their own salvation. However, their reputation was primarily driven by the Münster Rebellion.

In the early 1500s, an Anabaptist named Jan Matthys started teaching others that Jesus is returning soon and that Münster, Germany, is the New Jerusalem, claiming to have direct communication from God. Even in casual conversations, he would pretend to talk to God on the side as he talked to other people. Eventually, his teaching started to catch on, and a large movement of Anabaptists gathered in the city until they had enough members to completely take over the local government. They started to get rid of private property, remove the Catholic bishop, and re-organize the social order around their brand of Christianity that would likely remind you of a pseudo-christian communist utopia. Anyone who was not considered a true believer was forced to either convert and be baptized, flee, or die (if you fled, you could not take anything with you).

Catholics and protestants teamed up to retake Münster and besieged the city. After resisting the siege for a few months, Jan Matthys claims to have a vision from God that he can fight thousands of men with only 12 men (a reference to the 12 tribes of Israel). He is quickly killed, his head placed on a pike outside of the city (his other remains thrown over the city walls), and his right-hand man, Jan van Leiden, leads in his place. Van Leiden adds additional rules, including polygamy, allowing him to eventually marry 16 wives with one of the wives ruling over the other 15. Women whose husbands fled the city or died resisting were forced to remarry as Jan van Leiden decreed no woman of marriageable age was permitted to be single. An insurrection was started to protest the polygamy taking over the city, but it was quickly quashed and the sexual degeneracy continued to ramp up.

After roughly 2 years of sieging, Münster is finally taken over and the Anabaptist leaders are captured. Jan van Leiden and several other leaders were executed publicly and their bodies placed in cages at the top of the cathedral in Münster. Those cages still hang there to this day.

Following the events of the Münster rebellion, Anabaptists were severely persecuted, and several thousand were executed and thrown in prison, both by Catholics and Lutherans. According to James White, the word Anabaptist was considered a swear word for several generations. Given all of this, you can imagine why the Particular Baptists in London wanted no part of the Anabaptist stigma. Making sure the surrounding authorities did not believe them to be Anabaptists would be critical in making sure they would not be executed. Distancing themselves from the Anabaptists could be a literal matter of life or death.

Confessions are protections for us against incidents like Münster. What happened there is how many world religions started. Think to yourself, how many religions can you think of that start with one man having a revelation, claiming to hear directly from God, which leads to them inventing their own religion?

Joseph Smith started to have visions in the 1820s. He believed that God and Jesus (remembering he does not believe Jesus to be God), appeared to him and said there were no more true churches and

that it was up to him to create his own. An angel appears to him several years later with some golden tablets that he translates into the Book of Mormon. Not long after he's promoting polygamy, racism, and the belief that people will occupy their own planets.

In 600 BC, Muhammad starts to have his own visions, believing to hear from God through the angel Gabriel, starts to teach that the Israelites also have it wrong (remember this is before Christ's birth) and that God's kingdom is brought through conquest called Jihad. He marries a 6-year-old child and gives birth to the most violent mainstream religion in the world.

Today, there are churches in America that believe that their faith is shown through their bravery in handling venomous snakes. If you've never seen what I'm talking about, google "snake handling church" and you can find plenty of videos.

The long story short is that these churches wrongly interpret [Mark 16:18](#):

"they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them;"

The people will dance around with snakes during the music, and the snakes will repeatedly bite them. Some people have even died from the practice. To us, this and stories of other religions' origins are unfathomable. We think we would never believe such a thing, but we would. We underestimate the sinfulness of our own hearts.

The LBC isn't just a protection against those who seek to persecute the Particular Baptists, but a safeguard to keep us from being led astray by our own sinful inclinations. 2 Timothy says:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.

All of these false religions and doctrines pop up because in the depths of our sinful hearts, our flesh WANTS to believe the wrong things. We do not naturally desire to be obedient to God. We want the things that please our flesh. It requires the guidance of the Holy Spirit to direct us toward the truth. As Mike often says, we do not drift towards faithfulness. Many men have been led into error by sexual sin; it's no wonder that some of the first sinful practices that are established in Münster, Mormonism, Islam, and other false teachings are some brand of sexual degeneracy. Having a timeless, faithful document that sums up the whole of scripture allows us to point to it and tell false teachers, "We will not allow you to drag us into the eternal fire with you" ([Jude 23](#)).

The Savoy Declaration & Westminster Confessions

Around the same time as the first LBC, two robust paedobaptist confessions were written that (for the sake of time) I'll address together: The Savoy Declaration and The Westminster Confession. The first draft of Westminster came first in 1646 with the Savoy coming much later in 1658 by Puritan John Owen. The church was in desperate need of reform, leading to these confessions re-establishing core truths of scripture in almost every part of the Christian life. Both seek to answer at length, "What does a Christian believe?"

The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARP) still teach the Westminster Confession today as their church's official confessions. Minor changes have been made over the years, but their strong stance on infant baptism and the sovereignty of God are some of the core tenets of what makes their confession different from others at the time. If you want to know what most orthodox Presbyterians believe, reading these confessions is a great place to start.

The places where the Savoy and Westminster differ are primarily related to ecclesiology—the church's structure and polity. John Owen and the Savoy are congregationalists, while Westminster defines church leadership as controlled by a presbytery.

If you compare the Westminster, Savoy, and the 1689 LBC you'll find a plethora of overlapping themes and, in a lot of places, identical language. I will include a link to a side-by-side view of the 3 confessions at the bottom of the page if you'd like to see more examples.

The 1689 copies the Savoy and Westminster word-for-word in many sections. For example, in the very first article titled Of the Holy Scriptures, the section on which books are included in the Bible is the same in all three, except the Savoy & Westminster use “Song of Songs”, while the 1689 says “Song of Solomon.” These are some of the types of minute differences you’ll find throughout—primarily minor word changes that would help Baptists, Presbyterians, and other orthodox denominations have the confidence to wrap their arms around each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The 1689 London Baptist Confession

Though the first London Baptist Confession was a good start, it was not as comprehensive as the Westminster and Savoy. Particular Baptists were still trying to separate themselves from Anabaptists and align themselves with the broader Protestant church. The Particular Baptist church also needed to clarify what they believed about topics not included in the first one, like the Sabbath, Covenant Theology, Marriage, and Church Polity. In addition, they wanted to strengthen their language surrounding the sovereignty of God.

There are 32 chapters in total, intended to cover a broad swath of Christian orthodox doctrine, like: the character of God, the Trinity, creation, justification, eternal security (perseverance of the saints), government, baptism, communion, church, Christian liberty, and more. One reason the 1689 is influential is that it speaks to nearly every aspect of the Christian life. You would be hard-pressed to find an issue a believer could be faced with that is not at least broadly discussed in the confession and by extension, scripture. Each section and statement has at least one scriptural reference to show where in God’s word it is derived from. It is intended to be a document soaked in God’s word.

The document was originally published anonymously in 1677, then later adopted by the general assembly in London. Nobody knows for sure who the exact authors are. After its acceptance, it became the confession for over a hundred particular Baptist churches in Britain. It builds on the strengths of the first one, showing how Baptist doctrine is properly in keeping with the scriptures and the greater protestant network of churches being formed in the Reformation.

Where you’ll find significant differences from it and the Westminster and Savoy are concerning Baptism, covenant theology, and church structure. These are not small differences in opinion, but significant issues that are worth having different churches for. There is a reason we do not have Presbyterians in our church leadership. It is not because we believe they are not brothers in Christ, but because we are seeking to be faithful to true doctrine and maintain the unity of the church.

Staying Grounded in History

Some of the stories we talked about today may seem like just that, stories. Whether you realize it or not, the London Baptists in particular (pun intended) are important for understanding how even the SBC began. They are the men and women who laid the groundwork for modern, congregational Baptist life. They re-established core doctrines like believer’s baptism, Christian liberty, and salvation by grace through faith alone. Though we owe much to Christians even before them, we are still reaping the benefits from the work of the authors of the 1689. They stood in the face of persecution and created a timeless document that we can rely on to help defend us from forces that might seek to turn us away from God. If persecution ever finds us, may God find us as faithful as they were to live courageously and stand for the truth.