

EQUIP 4 | Doctrine and the Church

This is our fourth EQUIP class, up to this point we have looked at:

1. How to study the Bible
2. The Meaning of Marriage
3. Homosexuality
4. The Foundations of the Christian Faith

Over the next four weeks, we are going to look at an overview of what it means to be a Christian; what are the things we should be thinking and talking about when it comes to the Bible and the church? We are going to do this by using one of the guides that the church has used to know and define doctrine through time: the confession.

About a year ago, in an all-church meeting, the elders mentioned that it was our intention to adopt an official confession for our church. One person told me that it took him 10 minutes to figure out that being confessional did not mean setting up a confession booth in the back of the sanctuary. To be clear, that is not what we ever intend to do. Instead, a confession is a clearly defined set of beliefs that the church commits itself to teaching, practicing, and using as a tool to guide how we operate.

This brings up 3 questions:

1. Why is it important to specifically define doctrine?
2. Is a confession the best way to do this?
3. Which confession would be most helpful to our church (there is more than one)?

These 3 questions are what I want to address to in tonight's time, starting broad: why doctrine? and getting more specific: why the LBC of 1689 (which is the confession that we will be working through in the following 3 weeks and hope to adopt as a church later this year).

We start with the question: is doctrinal definition really that important? For many people, the idea of codifying or declaring certain things to be true is nothing more than a way to limit God and cause dissension; doctrine has been used so poorly, so many times (abusively, nit-picky, and to show ones theological superiority) that it has proven itself unhelpful...the challenge goes. This isn't a challenge to take lightly or push aside. The truth is, a misuse of doctrine causes problems. I often say: bad theology hurts people, but it is also true that good theology handled badly hurts people. There is no question that the pursuit of doctrinal purity can cause problems, to the extent that many are left wondering: is it valuable at all? Is its misuse a reason to give up on it altogether?

This argument would be a horrible blow to the truth we confess, if our truth didn't already confront it. What I mean is, if we said that becoming a Christian fixes your problems and the more Scripture you know the better you will be, then the track record of the church would prove our confession wrong. We would be forced to not only admit that we are in error, but that our means are ineffective and useless. **That isn't what we confess.** The gospel tells us that we are totally depraved; we take good things and twist them to our own advantage. We read the value of things based in how they serve our desires and short-term goals. So, when someone takes the gospel and applies it in unbiblical ways, it does not undo the truth of our sinfulness, it

confirms it! The misuse of doctrine does not prove wrong a doctrine that tells you sinful people will misuse it.

That only answers half of the question; the real question we want answered is: is it helpful to work at and fight for a defined set of beliefs? Is established doctrine beneficial? I will answer this question in two ways, one answer from the Bible and one from church history.

First, the theological answer...God wants us to know Him. While this knowing goes beyond a knowledge about Him, it is not less than this. God has revealed Himself to us in two ways primarily: general revelation and special revelation.

1. General revelation refers to creation, the heavens declare the glory... (Romans 1)

2. Special revelation is God's supernatural communication with creation (miracles/Bible)

The Bible makes it into the miraculous category, not just because it is a really good book, but because of the way it came about. God's Word is available to us because God inspired it to be written. Famous verse from 2 Timothy 3 tells us:

[16] All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, [17] that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

This tells us more than just how it came about, it also tells us what to do with it. This Word is not given simply to be interacted with as our schedules allow. It has been revealed to us in order to:

1. Teach
2. Reproof (convict)
3. Correction
4. Training in righteousness

In other words, God has miraculously delivered to us His truth. He has worked through people to provide for us a revelation of Himself that we can understand, teach others, counsel us, guide us, and grow us. Is it important to fight for a correct set of beliefs? Only if you believe that a Christian is called to evangelize, repent, and grow in sanctification. If not, then vague spirituality is enough. God has not called us into spirituality, He has called us to Himself. Knowing that self, knowing Him and His commands is imperative to accomplishing any other part of what He calls us to. He says this up front:

[4] "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. [5] You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. [6] And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. [7] You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. [8] You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. [9] You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. | Deuteronomy 6:4–9

He starts with LOVE. which no one has a problem with, and then says: here is how you love me.

1. Knowing my word

2. Talk with others about it
3. Obeying it.

God's definition of how His people will love Him is to know Him as He has revealed Himself, to use that revelation as the truth by which we live our lives. Does this mean that the Bible will tell us everything about everything? NO. One of the things God does for us is intentionally tells us what we need to know and leaves out what we don't. We'll get back to why this is important later, but suffice it to say, one of the things that God's Word does for us is prioritize what is important. God leaves out things that we either can't know or don't need to know so that we are left with what is necessary and sufficient. What we need and what is enough. One of my favorite verses highlights this:

[29] "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law. | Deuteronomy 29:29

There are God things, there are our things. There are questions we will never get answers to, but the answers we are given should be studied, known, and taught. Another way to say this would be:

we don't go to the Bible to find the answers to our questions. We go there to find what God says is true and important. Some of it will overlap; many of the questions we have are in the struggle of sin and purpose and need for salvation...but a lot of the things we allow to cause us anxiety and stress, we will find are not priorities of God. Doctrine is important both in what it says and what it doesn't say; we only know this by allowing God to dictate how we think about Him.

That is the theological reason for working on and fighting for doctrine. The reason from church history is: doctrine is what keeps the church alive. It gives the church something to teach, it convicts the church when it goes astray, it protects the church from errors, it gives the church direction. While God is certainly the power that sustains the church, He has chosen to shape and use the church through the means of theology. The church is: pillar and buttress of that is what we are called to support and hold up.

There is a reason for all of these creeds and confessions throughout church history and they weren't just to draw lines and create fights. The Holy Spirit worked through the church in time to strengthen and confirm its witness; to firm up its doctrine. Different ideas would come along:

Jesus wasn't really human
Jesus wasn't really God
Gnostic writings being offered up as inspired Scripture...

The church would, through the Spirit and the Word, work through these issues and establish statements of the faith that were summaries of what the Bible teaches. They were all an attempt to work out the revelation of God in order to accomplish the Great Commission call to:

[19] Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." | Matthew 28:19–20

To make disciples, you have to know what to teach, what to baptize into, and who to follow as a disciple. This is all done through an established set of beliefs that are passed from one person to another. We could keep going on this, but suffice it to say: doctrine as an end is dangerous and potentially abusive, but doctrine as a tool given to us by God to accomplish the task set out before us is essential. The church does not exist without doctrine. We as people on the other side of the world from where the Great Commission was given would not have the gospel had it not been codified and taught. The truth of Jesus would not have survived 2000 years if it were not known, taught, and practiced.

Doctrine is IMPORTANT, how you use it is also important. Which brings us to the second question of the night: Is the confession the best use of it?

WHY A CONFESSION

To answer that question we first have to know what a confession is. This is different than: confessing your sins to one another (which is also important). A confession is a statement of faith that is meant to give a brief summary of the whole teaching of the Bible, or at least the main doctrines to root the church in. Philip Schaff, the Christian Historian defined it this way:

a confession of faith IS for public use, a form of words setting forth with authority certain articles of belief, which are regarded by the framers as necessary for salvation, or at least for the well-being of the Christian Church.

It is meant to be used publicly (for the whole church, not just personal conviction), it is authoritative (it is set out as a standard/measure) and it is intended for the well-being of the church. How does this work?

A church that is confessional puts forward a statement of belief that represents its understanding of the Bible. This confession is used by the elders to guide what we do, by the church to know what is of importance, to test if we are being faithful, to answer questions about belief, and to stand out as a public statement of what we believe. Let me lay out for you 5 reasons why a confession is a helpful tool for churches to use (notice I said helpful, not demanded of every church).

1. Gives a clear picture of what the church believes and teaches.

One of the most difficult questions for me to answer is: what kind of church are you? As a non-denominational church, we can't just answer with a name or tradition: Baptists/Presbyterian/Methodist...in some ways I am just fine with. To be honest, my typical answer, 'we believe the Bible' leaves a lot to be desired. Every person who claims Christianity would also state that they believe the Bible. It is important to explain what it is that we believe the Bible teaches.

To have a confession gives a place to point people to say: this is who we are, this is what we believe. While I could sit and describe to people what I believe to be the main issues, to walk through, point by point, what the core convictions of the church are and what theological distinctions, it is helpful to be able to say: this document does a good job summarizing what we believe as a church.

Most churches have statements of faith, and many have the same one. The typical statement of faith is written to be as inclusive as possible. We believe in the Bible, Jesus, and the gospel. We

believe in all of these, but I think that it is wise to be a bit more robust and specific in what we believe the Bible says, what Jesus did, and what the gospel actually changes. It is helpful for our church to be up front about our distinctions, because the glory of grace is in these distinctions, not just in general proclamations. It is a way that we declare with confidence that we trust in what God has said. I think the following quote sums this up well:

A confession asserts that God has spoken clearly and specifically. Holding to a confession is an act of humility, admitting that we are not, as we would wish, the final arbiters of truth. Instead, in our confessions we proclaim that God has given us absolute, nonnegotiable truth. Confession is our obedient response to what God has spoken. It is an acknowledgment that God is God, and that we are not. | Reeves

A confession allows us to put what we believe God says out there. To make it abundantly clear that while there are different interpretations of what God has said, what He has given us in the Bible is the authority that drives us and the means that we will be corrected. This issue of different interpretations leads to the second benefit of a confession:

2. Starting point for theological conversations.

People don't often think of theological arguments as a good thing, let alone a goal. If it is valuable, we are going to pursue it. I love this quote by Gresham Machen in *Christianity and Liberalism*:

"In the sphere of religion, as in other spheres, the things about which men are agreed are apt to be the things that are least worth holding; the really important things are the things about which men will fight.

No one is going to bother starting a fight over something that doesn't matter, but they will be willing to defend a truth worth defending (he wrote this before the internet). The truth is, one of the reasons we don't value serious dialogue is because most of our debates and conversations are carried out in unhealthy forms. We misunderstand the position of the people with whom we disagree and we form a straw man version of their position. Wouldn't it be way better if they had a chance to represent their position in a robust, defined way. This is what a confession does. It allows our beliefs to be seen for what they are and where they come from (confession includes all of the Bible passages that lead to the doctrine). What this means is that it gives you something concrete to agree or disagree with.

So, when I sit down with my Presbyterian friends, I don't have that awkward, I wonder what they believe and if we agree or disagree...that feeling makes a conversation less than helpful because half of the energy goes into trying to put caveats on what we are saying and tiptoeing around potential landmines. I know what my Presbyterian friends believe (I have read their confession). I can disagree with them, and I can question the conclusions that they have come to, but it is because I know what those conclusions are. A confession puts things down in writing to be engaged with. It invites this engagement.

You don't have to agree with everything (you will even see as we go through that the elders here have some qualifications), but the process of having qualifications defined is actually very helpful and gives a starting point for further discussion. I believe that is a kind thing to do for people. To keep them in vague understanding, so that they aren't sure where the church stands

and have to live in fear of stepping over a line they can't see, is stressful. To know where the lines are and where you stand in relationship to them is actually freeing and allows for healthier relationships and conversation.

3. Gives answers to FAQs

The third helpful part of a confession is that it serves as an answer to many of the questions people have about the church.

What do you believe about Baptism?
How does the church structure work?
How do we understand family?

These questions are answered in the confession. This doesn't mean that your pastors don't want to answer your questions anymore, but as we said in the previous point, this gives our conversation a framework. What does the church believe? read this, look up all the verses associated and then come back and we will discuss your thoughts on it. Of course, your thoughts are not as VALID as the authority of the confession, which sits in submission to the WORD. So our discussion is going to be guided by the confession, rested in the Bible.

The reason why this is important is because I spend a lot of time answering questions that people should have the answers to. This doesn't mean - you should already know all of this - but you should know where to go. This provides a source to go to when you have questions.

4. Act as a horizon line for our theological journey.

The fourth benefit of a confession is that it is an unchanging (mostly unchanging) declaration of God's truth. I use the term horizon line, like an attitude indicator on a plane - that thing that shows what your position relative to balance. Pilots need that because in flight it is difficult to determine if you are balanced in flight. likewise, as we go through life, we tend to not notice when we get out of balance.

God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, so is His truth. While we change, and grow and rethink, God stays the same. It is helpful to have a stable statement that acts as a measure for us of how we are being altered. Sometimes this means that there is something in the confession you thought was off, that you have grown to love. Sometimes it may be something that you have started to drift away from in the confession, but it stays in one place as a reminder that YOU have moved.

This is why I think a historical confession is especially helpful. What I mean by that is: we have the option of adopting a newer confession, writing our own, OR taking on a confession that was written a long time ago. I am sorta shifting over to that third question: why the LBC1689? as we continue to answer the question: why a confession at all? The question here is modern, created, or historic. There is a lot of debate about this.

It is easier to take a modern that has been written to address modern issues, or to write one for your own context. The struggle of adopting a historical confession is actually a benefit. Here's why. To take on a confession written hundreds of years ago is an even greater horizon line for us. It forces us to see that our greatest concerns are not their greatest concerns, are not God's greatest concerns. Are these confessions written in a specific historical context? OF COURSE.

Through time, they have been interacted with and used by people in many different times and contexts, interactions we have access to. It allows us to take a longer look at this idea of priorities. I think a lot of our anxiety currently is because we are told that we are supposed to care about everything; the confession helps to balance that out and connect us to what is most important for us to care about. It frees us from feeling like we somehow are not engaged enough in the things that the current climate is demanding us to make a priority.

5. Connects us to a communion of saints

This is the other benefit of a historical confession. We are not only prone to prioritize our issues, but also to prioritize our experience. It is helpful to connect ourselves to those who have gone before us, the great cloud of witnesses. We need to remember that millions of people believing these things have loved God and loved their neighbor and don't need us to come and save Christianity. We need to see that the simple act of knowing God and obeying Him (through this confession) has born fruit and produced a gospel legacy. We need this so that we don't get discouraged. We need this so that we don't get too proud. We need this because it helps us to see ourselves as small in the grand scheme of God's redemptive plan, but important because we are the next link of the chain to carry it forward.

Let me end with this. We chose the confession that think best fits with who we are as a church, you will see why as we engage with it over the final 3 weeks. We will actually go really fast point by point through it, stopping at a few places that need more attention. The elders believe that this is the next step in the maturity of our church because it allows us to:

1. Declare boldly what we believe and where we fit into the history of the church
2. Builds a stated foundation to agree/disagree over
3. Gives us priorities for the life of the church

This is not just some document to shove into a corner, it is going to be how we teach, train, think through, discuss...it is your job to help us decide if this is helpful. I will send out a link to read: READ THROUGH IT. I will be preparing some printed summaries of it, as we work through it. I need you all to let me and the other elders know where you are as we go through it. We want you to be part of the process of adopting it.

QUESTIONS?