

A Confessional Church – a chat about Confessions

The Anglican Church stands in a tradition of being a 'Confessional' Church. Confessions are, to a greater or lesser extent, comprehensive summaries of the Christian faith. In fact, 'Confessions' could be better described as a brief 'systematic theology' of the Scriptures i.e., they seek to give a complete systematic summary of the crucial aspects of Biblical teaching. Do you ever hear Anglicans referring to their Confession? By the way, what is our Confession of Faith? It is The Thirty Nine Articles, which are to be found in the back of the Book of Common Prayer (1662) or An Australian Prayer Book (1971). What was the purpose of our Confession of Faith?

It was compiled for the purpose of the,

1. Clarification of the Christian Faith

You may ask the question why we need 'Confessions' if we have the Bible? Is not the Bible sufficient in making 'clear' what Christians/Church believe? It is, but the texts of the Bible can easily lead to confusion about what we should believe, if you do not have a thorough grasp of all that the Bible teaches. The meaning or intention of any book / history or author can be 'distorted' by taking a section out of context.

Confessions are a form of words that:

- (i) gathers the '*plain*' or '*obvious*' teaching of Scripture in a succinct/short space or compass, using concise and carefully chosen words.
- (ii) make it difficult for others to use isolated texts/ideas to distort the whole meaning of Scripture.

The underlying assumptions of the Confessions and Scripture which they summarize is that the 'truth' can be KNOWN! And such 'truth' is not something to be 'debated', but believed and obeyed! Jesus and New Testament writers speaks of truth as clearly recognizable: it is not a matter of 'interpretation', but 'implementation'! We will be judged on the fact that the 'truth' of Jesus words are clear, not confusing, but plain and unmistakable – Mark 8:38!

Have you ever been lost or in the dark? It is a wonderful relief to find the right way, or a light! Jesus said, "I am the light of the world" – His words can take us out of darkness of ignorance about God and moral confusion; they are clear and understandable! The Old Testament uses the same illustration: 'Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path': it is clear!

The purpose of our Confession was not only for the 'Clarification of the Christian Faith'; it was also to:

2. Condemn, Curtail, and Correct Error in the Christian Church

While the Bible is the sole and sufficient authority for establishing what the Church believes, it can very easily be abused/misused, and be quoted to establish almost any

belief you wish! Biblical texts can easily be taken out of context and used to support heresy or incorrect teaching. It was at a very early stage in the life of the church when its leaders recognized the importance of making clear summaries of the Christian faith. In the third Century AD a bishop by the name of Arius, who was articulate and possessed a comprehensive knowledge of Scripture, wanted to assert that Jesus was 'like' God, but he denied that Jesus was in 'nature' God! He used Scripture in his defence and arguments, but he put his own interpretation on the texts, so as to deny their plain meaning. It was this 'error' that led to the compilation of the Nicene Creed. (Used in The Anglican Service of Holy Communion).

Confessions, because of their more comprehensive nature, are a far better resource for combating error. Confessions 'constrain' or 'restrict' or 'limit' the faith of the Church to a 'definite' set of beliefs against which other teaching can be compared. They give a theological 'structure' which prevents 'unbalanced' or 'conflicting' teaching. They prevent the attitude of 'choice', ie., 'picking and choosing' what we like in Scripture and refusing to accept the parts we don't like. In many Anglican Churches today we have the 'smorgasbord' approach – pick the portions of the Bible you prefer! In theological terms, the Anglican church has become increasingly 'reductionist'. That sounds like a big word, but do not be intimidated - we hear constantly about 'reduction' in the work force. We know what it means; that the work force is being reduced or getting smaller. Reductionism in theology is the practice of 'reducing' the doctrines of Scripture that are unpalatable in today's thinking!

A further purpose of Confessions was that it might be the means of,

3.Contending for the Christian Faith; conveying and continuing the Christian Faith!

Let me challenge you! What do you believe? Are you serious about what you believe? Have you read the Thirty Nine Articles? Recently? Why not? You could read it through in about the same time it would take you to watch the half-hour news! Why are we so ignorant? Have you read the Book of Homilies or any of them? Jesus prayed in John 17 that His disciples would be 'one'. What did He mean? The Apostle Paul said in Ephesians 4:13-14, that God's purpose for the church was to, "attain the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine (teaching), by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles." The 'unity' of the church is not something we create by steadily removing doctrinal differences (reductionism).

Rather, our 'unity' is a consensus of belief in which we choose to 'participate', by believing that Scripture provides us with the 'truth' to which we must all adhere! By providing a clear and precise summary of the Christian Faith, Confessions are a strong defence against error, and a precise means of contending for the Christian Faith.

Pastor J Lowe