

# Why?

The Church of Scotland is currently, through its Theological Forum, re-examining the place of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in the life of the Church. In this discussion, it is important to ask the question: Why do we need a Confession of Faith? Some would argue that, if we have the Bible, that is enough. The best way to answer the question is to explain the relationship between the Bible and the Confession of Faith.

## The Purpose of Confessions

Given that the Bible has been subject to many different and indeed contradictory interpretations, the Church throughout the centuries has consistently issued statements defining orthodox Christian belief. In some cases, these statements have become part of the tradition of the church and affirmation of them has become a test of faith, for example, the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed.

The doctrinal statements in these Creeds are regarded as being central to Christianity. A discussion between representatives of the Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist and Pentecostal churches will soon demonstrate that there is substantial unity on these Creeds.

Nevertheless, among those churches which happily affirm the doctrines contained in the Creeds, there is division on many other matters.

For this reason, most churches have defined their distinctive beliefs by means of Confessions and Catechisms, mostly produced during the Reformation and post-Reformation periods. In general, a Creed is a statement of the Christian Faith which is universally accepted by all the major branches of the church, whereas a Confession or a Catechism is normally an expression of the particular beliefs of an individual church or denomination.

The Confession adopted by the Church of Scotland at the Reformation was *The Scots Confession* (1560). Then in 1647, the Church of Scotland adopted *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. The purpose of these Confessions and the Catechisms was to explain what the Church believed to be the teaching of Scripture, particularly on points which had been in dispute.

## The Authority of Confessions

Having explained the purpose of a Confession, we must now ask what authority a confession has in the life of the church.

When we affirm a Confession, we are saying that, in the light of our own understanding of Scripture and that of those who have gone before us, this is the best summary we can give of what we believe the Scriptures teach.

At the same time, we must say that Scripture has authority and priority over any Confession. Any attempt to give a Confession priority over Scripture, must be resisted. At the same time, any attempt to put in place Confessional statements which are clearly contrary to Scripture, is equally to be rejected.

### **The Writing of Confessions**

Confessional statements ought to be constantly subjected to scrutiny through careful study of Scripture and should always be recognised as transient documents. Confessions should be written regularly so that the church always has doctrinal statements which deal with the issues and concerns of the day.

The writers of the *Scots Confession* said that if anyone could show from Scripture that they had made a mistake, they undertook to correct it, or show from Scripture that they were correct. That is a healthy attitude.

### **Conclusion**

If it can be shown that elements of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* are not true to Scripture, then we should consider changes. Also, if we believe that we need a new Confession to speak to the issues facing the Church today, that should also be considered. What we must not accept is the attempt to replace the *Westminster Confession of Faith* with some weak, liberal statement which undermines the authority of Scripture. In other words, we must not change our Confession to suit the prevailing opinions within society, only on the basis of the further study of Scripture.