

Confessing Christ

in the face of apostasy and unbelief

From New Testament times there has been the tendency for individuals and groups in the Christian Church to veer away from *the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints* (Jude 1:3, 1 Corinthians 11:2,23, 15:3). The New Testament word for this veering away is *aphistémi*, 'to draw away from', or 'to depart from' (Hebrews 3:12). In English this word is *apostasy*.

Whenever apostasy has occurred others have responded by publicly confessing the faith and contrasting it with the apostate views and practices. Indeed the principle of confession is an important one in the Scriptures. John the Baptist *confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ...but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."* John 1:20,27. Paul says that Jesus *made the good confession before Pontius Pilate* (1 Timothy 6:13). Timothy also *made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses* (1 Tim. 6:12).

The good confession

The good confession is our public acknowledgement of God's grace in Christ towards us as sinners. When we make the good confession we confess our own unrighteousness and God's righteousness in Christ.

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. 1 Timothy 1:15

This confession is good because it is true, and because it acknowledges God's good grace, and contrasts with us confessing our own self-righteousness.

The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' Luke 18:11-12

Such a confession is not good because it is not true and it does not acknowledge the great mercy of God.

Confession in the face of apostasy

It is important to realize that significant parts of the New Testament (and the Old) were written in response to apostasies.

- When Judaisers infiltrated the churches preaching *a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you* (Galatians 1:8) Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians and made the good confession of faith in Christ for salvation.

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. Galatians 2:19-21

- Later in the first century there were those who claimed that Jesus did not come in the flesh. John's Gospel and his first epistle strongly refute such departures from the apostolic witness.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and

proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us. 1 John 1:1-2

Upon reflection we may find ourselves thankful that these apostasies occurred, for without them we may never have had such strong affirmations of Christ's incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection.

Apostasy and confession in church history

There is always heresy present in the church which causes the church to clarify the truth. The problem comes when the church refuses to teach the truth and instead, upholds or supports heresy. This is apostasy. Throughout the history of the Christian church, whenever apostasy has arisen, God has moved believers to confess their faith in Jesus Christ as that faith was witnessed to by Jesus' apostles.

- Around 300AD, when Arius announced that he did not believe that Jesus was God and many in the church followed him, Athanasius and the Nicene Fathers expressed the biblical witness in the doctrine of the Trinity and confessed the apostolic faith in the words of the Nicene Creed.
- In the 1500s Pope Leo, being strapped for cash in Rome, began selling salvation for a small contribution to the church (called indulgences). People such as Martin Luther and John Calvin began to confess the faith. Luther nailed his confession to the door of the church in the form of 95 statements. When called to account for opposing the Pope he stood firm in his confession famously saying, "Here I stand I can do no other, so help me God".
- When the Church of England was suffering appalling excesses, and deistic theology was widely preached (which denied the work of Christ), John and Charles Wesley and George Whitfield began to confess the apostolic gospel, and being banned from preaching in the churches they preached to large crowds in the open air.
- In the 1930s the mainline Protestant churches in Germany came out in support of Hitler and the Third Reich. They said in effect 'Jesus is Lord, and Hitler is OK'. Immediately a Confessing Church sprang up confessing 'Jesus is Lord, which means that Hitler is not'. The Protestant church leaders were tolerated, but the Confessing Church leaders were arrested and some, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, were hanged.

The confessing movement today

Thus it has been throughout the history of the Christian church that whenever apostasy has occurred a confessing movement has sprung up. What is stunning about the present moment in church history is that every mainline Protestant church in the Western world currently has a confessing movement.

A very informative and helpful book has been written on the current confessing movement in North America by Thomas Oden. It is called *Turning Around the Mainline—How Renewal Movements are Changing the Church*. Oden's book is an essential primer for the current confessing movement. He distinguishes between a schismatic movement which responds to apostasy by splitting the church, and a confessing movement which commits to remaining within the Church while calling it back to its own confessional statements. Oden gives a lot of helpful instruction on how to do this effectively.

The Character of this Confessing Movement

When a confessing movement springs up there is a tendency to see it as a one-issue movement (e.g. its all about sex!), or as a political pressure group (e.g. it's all about church politics!) It is unfortunate if those within a confessing movement or those looking on view it this way. The fact is that whenever part of the Christian church departs from the faith it always has to do with the core doctrines God, Christ, and salvation. The Protestant churches of the Western world today contain many leaders who deny the fundamental doctrines of Christ, namely:

- that the man Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity,
- that his death on the Cross was God's way of making atonement for the sins of humanity,
- and that he rose from the tomb on the third day as the first fruits of the resurrection.

In the face of such apostasy the confessing movement confesses "Jesus Christ—Son of God, Lamb of God, and Lord and God". The early Christians found a similar way of making their confession with a simple sign. They used the sign of a fish because the Greek word for fish, ICHTHUS, was an acronym for *Jesus Christ—God, Son, Saviour*.

What is The ACC?

The Assembly of Confessing Congregations (within the Uniting Church in Australia) is a group of congregations within the UCA which has responded publicly to certain decisions and actions of the National Assembly of the UCA. The response of these congregations is to declare, among other things, that they believe that the National Assembly's decisions on same gender sexual relationships are apostate, and are the result of a departure from substantial elements of the faith. The ACC has responded by confessing the apostolic faith in solidarity with the confessing movement internationally.

A confessing congregation is one which confesses, in word and deed, that Jesus Christ is Son of God, Lamb of God and Lord and God. Such a congregation makes its confession in fellowship with the wider confessing movement.

A confessing Christian is one who fearlessly and openly makes the good confession—in the congregation, the community and the wider church (Romans 10:9,10).

In times of apostasy many are heard to say 'I do not want to have anything to do with all of this—it is too confusing, it will never happen here. Why can't we ignore all of this and just meet and worship like we have always done'. We need to understand that apostasy and confessing are part of the regular life of the Christian church. God allows apostasy because it creates the occasion where the true faith can be boldly and clearly confessed by fearless and true believers.

For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. 2 Corinthians 4:5-6

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