

The Doctrinal and Practical Standards for Local Church Membership According to the Bible and the Second London Confession of Faith

Circular Letter Prepared for the 2005 ARBCA General Assembly
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Greetings in the name of our Savior and Lord. May you know more of his love, growing always in grace.

I have been asked to write to you on the topic *The Doctrinal and Practical Standards for Local Church Membership According to the Bible and the Second London Confession of Faith*. This is an important subject, with significant practical implications for all of our churches. May the Lord give us all wisdom as we consider these things.

Church Membership

The topic assigned assumes that the Word of God and our Confession teach a doctrine of church membership. This assumption is, in our judgment, correct. While it would be profitable to review all of the arguments in favor of membership, I will pass by these and pursue the issue at hand more directly. The New Testament does not provide us with a manual detailing procedure to be used in bringing new members into our churches, but does provide us with sufficient information to guide us through the process. It is my desire to gather this information and present it to you in this letter.

When individuals seek formally to become part of one of our assemblies, we are faced with a variety of questions: Are they believers? Have they professed their faith in Christ in baptism? Do they walk in newness of life? Do they understand the Christian faith? Do they understand who we are and why we believe what we do? Do they have previous church experience? If so, does that previous experience complement, parallel or contradict the practice of our church? What is their level of maturity? Each of these (and there are others) is an important practical question.

The Testimony of Scripture

As always, the first place we must look for instruction is in the Word of God. From the beginning of the book of Acts, we notice a pattern: when God saves sinners, he adds them to the local church (Acts 2:41, 47; 5:11-14; 11:22-26). In each of these cases, the number of members was increased as the gospel spread. We note that in every case, those added were believers who professed their faith by means of baptism. The first standard for membership must be a living faith in Jesus Christ, evidenced in the baptismal commitment. As we shall see, this does not mean or imply a full-blown theological understanding of the Christian faith. It simply means that every individual must be able to express his or her conviction that God has saved them through Christ.

An interesting incident which sheds a great deal of light on the process involved in becoming a church member is recorded for us in Acts 9:26-30. After Saul was converted and returned to Jerusalem, we are told that “he tried to join the disciples,” but the members of the church were unwilling to receive him because they were afraid and did not accept his claim to be a Christian disciple like them. Only after Barnabas took Saul to the apostles in order to vouch for him did the church relent and accept him; the acceptance was complete, as the “brethren” took steps to protect their new brother from the death threats emanating from the Hellenists. We see that the membership process involved the whole church, and they had a right to refuse membership to someone who might have brought trouble in their midst. Only after they received testimony from a reliable brother did they allow Saul to become one with them. In Jerusalem, there was a process involved in becoming a member, and standards were applied to those seeking to join. It is for this reason that we seek to use caution in our own process of uniting people with our assemblies.

Here is a second standard; in the case of Saul, it was ethical. A man who was notorious for his hatred of Christ and his church, even to the point of persecution, was held away from membership. Evidence of genuine submission to the Lordship of Christ is essential prior to acceptance into his church. We see this from the reverse perspective as well. When the apostles address the topic of church discipline, they regularly express the fact that ungodliness in life is a cause for removal from the Christian assembly (Rom. 16:17-18; 1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Thess. 3:6 ff.; 2 Tim. 3:6). Whether in a prospective member or an active member, there is no place for an unrighteous life.

The third standard for church membership has to do with truth. Not only were the early Christians concerned with the ethical behavior of individuals, they also were interested in the doctrinal understanding of those with whom they had new relationships. We may notice this in two ways. First, we have the interesting incidents of Apollos and the twelve “disciples” recorded in Acts 18:24-19:7. Apollos was a believer in Jesus Christ, and well-acquainted with the Old Testament Scriptures, even teaching “accurately the things of the Lord,” but he was still deficient in his understanding in certain areas. Aquila and Priscilla took the time to explain more fully the Christian faith to him, he gladly welcomed this further instruction, and was sent by the “brethren” to Achaia where he was received into their midst. Immediately after this, Luke tells us about twelve “disciples” who had a far more deficient understanding of the truth, apparently without comprehension of Jesus Christ or his Holy Spirit. When they confessed faith, it was necessary to baptize them in Jesus’ name. They were *deficient* disciples, not qualified for the church because of their lack of understanding. While Apollos could be received, these twelve could not.

Second, we notice a very interesting section of Paul’s letter to the Roman Church. From 14:1 through 15:7, the apostle deals with our issue. You will notice that these verses use language that is very similar, the words acting as something like brackets to mark out the topic under consideration. Paul gives instruction to the church about *receiving* people into their midst. Apparently among the Romans, there were some who were unwilling to welcome others who held differing views, and this caused the apostle to express some

specific guidelines. There are several relevant matters for us to notice. The first is the use of the word “receive.” The lexicons tell us that it is a word meaning “accept into one’s society” (*Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker*), a formal term indicating an act of acceptance. Secondly, the individual to be received is described as “weak in the faith.” This person is not a mature, seasoned believer with a thorough understanding of the system of Christian doctrine; to the contrary, he has a weak grasp of Christian truth. It is important to note that Paul says “the faith” and not simply “faith.” There is a difference between the two, the first refers to the system of Christian teaching, the latter to the personal expression of belief. It is impossible to know the relative strength or weakness of an individual’s belief; it is possible to quantify his comprehension of Christian truth. The church father Origen said this “A man who is weak in his faith is to be accepted and not rejected. For it is one thing to be weak in faith but quite another to be an unbeliever altogether. An unbeliever has no faith at all, but one who is merely weak has doubts about certain aspects of the faith” (cited in the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Romans*, 337). Thirdly, Paul does not make an absolute statement here—there is a qualifying clause—“not to disputes over doubtful things.” In the following verses, he describes what some of those doubtful things are. Some Christians do not understand the fullness of their freedom purchased by Christ, and as a result of this doctrinal deficiency, maintain certain ethical practices that are unnecessary for believers. Such as these may come to the church and seek admission, and the church must determine how to respond. Paul’s command is clear: receive them (14:1, 15:7), unless they have come to stir up trouble. If they can be silent and keep from disputing, receive them. If they cannot, it is clear that the church is under no obligation to do so. Like the book of Acts, the apostle grounds this work in God’s sovereign act. He says that God has received the weak man (14:3) in Christ (15:7), and on this basis, so should the church.

To summarize what we have said, the Scriptures in these passages teach us that the standards for church membership revolve around belief, life, and truth. True believers, who live as Christians, and have a foundational understanding of the gospel should be admitted. In the latter case, this may be done even if deficiencies are present.

The Testimony of Our Confession

The *Second London Confession of Faith* also addresses the subject we are considering, and not surprisingly emphasizes the same things. We should notice Chapter 26 paragraph 2, which says

All persons throughout the world, professing the faith of the Gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ, according unto it; not destroying their own profession by any Errors everting the foundation, or unholyness of conversation, (*b*) are and may be called visible Saints; (*c*) and of such ought all particular Congregations to be constituted.

b 1 Cor. 12. Act. 11.26.

c Rom. 1.7. Eph. 1.20,21,22.

In this statement there are two positive conditions: “All persons . . . (1) professing the faith of the gospel and (2) obedience by Christ according unto it”; and two negative

conditions “not destroying their own profession by (1) any errors everting the foundation, or (2) unholiness of conversation.” The teaching continues “are and may be called visible saints; and of such ought all particular congregations be constituted.” This is essentially the same doctrine we have noted above. “All persons,” who meet the two positive conditions of a profession of belief and obedience, and who do not undermine their profession with heretical views or sinful living ought to be part of the church. This is a very broad statement, but it reflects the truths we have seen in Scripture. It does not place the bar too high, but solidly upon the same basis as the Word of God. The conditions mentioned in the Confession are really images of each other. “Professing the faith of the gospel” is only acceptable when it is not undercut by fundamental errors, and “obedience to Christ” is contradicted by an unholy life.

We must notice what the Confession does not say. It does not say that every believer must have a full-blown understanding of Christian theology, even of its own theology, in order to become part of a church. In fact, the disqualifying condition is not a lack of understanding, but rather the actual commitment to heretical views. So long as the person does not hold such positions, but articulates faith in Christ and lives as an obedient disciple, he or she should be part of the church. The universal statement “all persons” is of some significance here. Those who meet these qualifications should be members of our churches. To use Paul’s language, if God has received them in Christ, so should we!

Of course this presents us with a new set of questions: what are “errors everting the foundation?” Some are self-evident: our puritan Baptist forefathers would never tolerate anti-trinitarianism, false views of the person and work of Christ, or defections from the Reformed and Scriptural gospel. But what about other less obvious errors, even in areas addressed by the Confession itself? This is more difficult, and perhaps must be left to each church to decide for itself. But this much is certain, the Confession is not more rigorous in its requirements for membership than are the Scriptures. It seems to hold the line at just the same place: if God has received them, we must receive them too, unless of course they come to us with the willingness to bring doubtful disputes.

Practical Issues

What are the practical implications of this? This is perhaps the most controversial portion of my letter. With caution, I believe that we should seek to follow the standards of the Confession cautiously and carefully. If a person is a believer in Jesus Christ, seeks to live in obedience to the Lord, and has no heretical opinions, he *might* be considered for admission, even if he disagrees with non-foundational doctrines in our church. He would, of necessity have to agree that he will gladly submit to the teaching of the church, not spread his differences, and never engage in doubtful disputations. Without this kind of promise, it would be highly unwise to admit him. But if it is genuinely given, he could be a member, though it is probably wisest to bar him from office.

One of the great issues of the Puritan era, often forgotten today, is the emphasis on personal conscience present in the Independent and Baptist thinkers. They understood that a Christian may, out of a good conscience and with honest intentions, have a

difference on doctrinal views. He was still to be treated as a brother and even welcomed into membership, given the right circumstances. We need to encourage the right of conscience, even if we disagree with the position it holds. This grace will adorn the church.

Are there examples of the kinds of views that might be tolerated? There might be many—every church needs to wrestle with its own circumstances. In one region, a certain view might be particularly controversial, in another the same position might not be so. In the first case, perhaps the assembly would be wise to forgo membership for the individual with the controverted position; in the second it might make no difference.

Almost as important as the doctrine is the character of the person involved. Is he gracious and able to live in peace with others, or is he proud and intent on spreading his views? The answer to this will go far in the determination of the matter. We *might* consider the admission of a gracious submissive man; we should not welcome a divisive man.

Another consideration which ought to be given weight has to do with the potential effect incorporating a person with differing views may have on a particular church. A larger assembly can probably absorb someone fairly easily; a smaller assembly perhaps could not. The doctrinal ethos of a smaller church in its distinctly Reformed Baptist character might potentially be altered by such an act, in which case great caution must be exercised.

The most difficult issue for us as Reformed Baptists is paedobaptism. Our churches are formed on the basis of believer's baptism by immersion, but in reality we have far more in common with our Reformed Paedobaptist brothers and sisters than we do with most baptistic evangelicals. Could we, or perhaps, should we, accept into membership a conscientious Paedobaptist, who has nowhere else to go for a church home, and who will agree graciously to maintain his divergent views in silence? In the appendix originally attached to our Confession we read the following:

We are not insensible that as to the order of God's house, and entire communion therein there are some things wherein we (as well as others) are not at a full accord among our selves, as for instance; the known principle, and state of the consciences of diverse of us, that have agreed in this Confession is such; that we cannot hold Church-communion, with any other than Baptized-believers, and Churches constituted of such; yet some others of us have a greater liberty and freedom in our spirits that way; and therefore we have purposely omitted the mention of things of that nature, that we might concur, in giving this evidence of our agreement, both among ourselves, and with other good Christians, in those important articles of the Christian Religion, mainly insisted on by us.

It is important to remember that by the word "communion" they intended what we mean by "membership." Differences on this matter were tolerated among them. Paedobaptists themselves hold opposing views on the subject of admitting Reformed Baptists into membership in their churches. Some are willing; others are not. The matter must be

wrestled with in every church. Our own history presents cases of churches which came to both positions, and who were able to live in association harmoniously. May the Lord give us grace to do the same.

One question that might come to mind is this: since we have adopted a full-subscription position for membership in our association, does not this doctrine in some sense require full-subscription on the local level? I do not believe that it does. While a church as a whole subscribes to all of the doctrines of the Confession, this does not imply that every individual in the church must do the same. There is an analogy to our national government. While it may be said on any given issue that it is the policy of the United States of America, and because I am a citizen, in some sense also my policy, I also have the right to dissent from that policy without losing my citizenship. I would argue that the same is true in the church: while the body as a whole confesses a system of doctrine, an individual within that body may hold a dissenting opinion on non-foundational points. The important factor is the willingness to forgo challenges to the doctrine of the whole for the sake of unity. This is not an argument for theological pluralism or relativism—the Confessional identity of the church must not be diluted. It is simply recognition that peaceful dissent from non-foundational doctrines is permissible given the due limitations noted.

Perhaps we should ask this question: on what basis can I keep a true Christian *out* of my church? Most of the time we start with the opposite question: what standards are required to bring Christians in? We must not be guilty of thinking in essentially sectarian terms when we think about qualifications for church membership.

It is our desire to present the beauty of our Savior to the world around us. Let it be our goal to reflect his gracious, kind spirit towards all men.

May the Lord give us wisdom, and grace by his spirit,

Your servant,

James M. Renihan