

Dr. John Gill's Confession of 1729.

IN his *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, Mc Glothlin tells us that "in 1764 Dr. John Gill's church, in London, published their Confession in twelve articles. It is rigidly Calvinistic." This Confession, which is of importance as an example of an early privately-published Calvinistic Confession, is older than might be inferred from Mc Glothlin's statement. In 1764 the church worshipped in Carter Lane, but, for the origin of the Confession, it is necessary to go back to the Horselydown days. Exactly two hundred years ago, in 1729, Gill first drew up the document. He had accepted the pastorate of the church in 1719, and on the 15th November "was received a member in full communion with the church." In the preceding month, 24 men members and 63 women members, in order that they might "not be charged with erring from the Constitution of the Church" subscribed their names in the church minute book "to the Solemn Covenant thereof as printed by the Rev. Mr. Benj. Keach, 1697." Gill added his signature in November.

Baptists have always refused to recognise creeds and confessions as of the law of the Medes and Persians. They consider a church is free to re-express itself as new light and truth are given. Gill was a true Baptist. He was not to be bound by the credal expression of an earlier day. Apparently he found Keach's finely phrased Solemn Covenant lacking in strong doctrine. Possibly it had too much Grace and too little Law! His stern and unbending Calvinism needed something more rigid into which to fit itself, with the result that, although in the days of Keach this *Solemn Covenant of the Church at its Constitution* was subscribed by all members at the time of their admission, it dropped out of use in Gill's early years. Spurgeon, whose orientation was nearer Keach than Gill, reprinted it in 1876 in *THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE: its History and Work*, and added "It must commend itself to the judgment of all candid Christians." Gill's Declaration did not find a place in that volume.

The first reference to the Declaration was at the Horselydown church meeting on 3rd February 1728/9, when it was agreed

yt a Declaration of ye faith & practice of the Church be drawn up by Bro. Gill to be read & assented to by members at their admission, instead of yt which was formerly called ye Church Covenant.

Seven weeks later, at the church meeting on 25th March 1729,

A Declaration of ye Church's faith & practice being drawn up according to an order of ye Church, was read & approved of & was ordered to be transcribed into ye Church book to be read & assented to at ye admission of members, it was likewise agreed yt it should be printed.

Gill duly inscribed it in the minute book in his own handwriting (he wrote the minutes for nearly thirty years), but unfortunately no copy of the first printed edition appears to be in existence.

At the church meeting on 17th September 1739,

The Church declaration of faith and practice being read with some amendments it was agreed yt it be reprinted & one hundred of 'em at least be purchased by ye Church & be given to every person yt proposes for communion.

This edition also appears to be out of print, but a comparison of the 1729 Confession with that of 1768, which incorporated amendments then made, does not reveal any trace of the 1739 amendments and suggests the possibility that the writer of the minutes was in error in stating there were amendments in 1739. Of the editions of 1764 and 1768 only three or four copies are known. As drawn up in 1729 and entered in the minute book following adoption by the church, the Confession was as follows:—

A Declaration of the faith & practice of the Church of Christ at Horselye-Down under ye pastoral care of Mr. John Gill, Drawn up & agreed upon in ye year 1729 to be read & assented to at the admission of members.

Having been enabled, through divine grace, to give up ourselves to the Lord, and likewise to one another by the Will of God, We account it a duty incumbent upon us to make a declaration of our faith & practice, to the honour of Christ & the glory of his name, knowing, that as with the heart man believeth unto righteousness, so with the mouth confession is made unto Salvation, which declaration is as follows, viz.

- I. We Believe that ye Scriptures of the old & new Testament are ye word of God, & the onely rule of faith & practice.
- II. We Believe that there is but one onely living & true God: that there are three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the holy Ghost, who are equal in nature, power & glory, & that ye Son & ye holy Ghost are as truly & as properly God as the Father.
- III. We Believe, that before the world began, God did elect a certain number of men unto everlasting Salvation whom he did predestinate to the adoption of children by Jesus Christ of his own free grace & according to the good pleasure of

his will, & that in pursuance of this gracious design, he did contrive & make a covenant of grace & peace with his Son Jesus Christ, on ye behalf of those persons, wherein a Saviour was appointed, & all Spiritual blessings provided for them; as also that their persons with all their grace & glory, were put into ye hands of Christ, & made his care & charge.

- IV. We believe, that God created the first man Adam after his image, & in his likeness, an upright holy and innocent creature, capable of serving & glorifying him but he sinning, all his posterity sinned in him & came short of the glory of God ye guilt of whose sin is imputed & a corrupt nature derived to all his offspring descending from him by ordinary & natural generation that they are by their first birth carnal & unclean, averse to all that is good, incapable of doing any & prone to every sin & are also by nature children of wrath & under a sentence of condemnation, & so are subject not onely to a corporal & involved in a moral, commonly called spiritual, but are also liable to an eternal death, from all which there is no deliverance but by Christ the Second Adam.
- V. We Believe, that the Lord Jesus Christ, being set up from everlasting as the mediator of the new covenant, & he having engaged to be ye Surety of his people, did in the fullness of time, really assume humane nature, in which nature he really suffered & died, as their substitute, in their room & stead, whereby he made all that satisfaction for their sins, which ye law & justice of God could require, as well as made way for all those blessings which are needfull for them both for time & eternity.
- VI. We believe, yt that Eternal Redemption which Christ has obtained by the shedding of his blood, is special & particular, that is to say, that it was onely intentionally designed for ye Elect of God, & sheep of Christ, who onely share ye special & peculiar blessings of it.
- VII. We Believe, that the Justification of God's Elect, is onely by the righteousness of Christ imputed to them, without ye consideration of any works of righteousness done by them, & that the full & free pardon of all their sins & transgressions past, present & to come, is onely through the blood of Christ, according to the riches of his grace.
- VIII. We Believe, yt the work of regeneration, conversion, sanctification, & faith is not an act of man's free will & power, but of the mighty, efficacious & irresistible grace of God.
- IX. We Believe, that all those who are chosen by the father,

redeemed by the son & sanctified by the spirit shall certainly & finally persevere, so yt not one of 'em shall ever perish, but shall have everlasting life.

- X. We Believe, that there will be a Resurrection of the dead, both of the Just and unjust, & that Christ will come a second time, to Judge both quick & dead, when he will take vengeance on ye wicked, & introduce his own people into his kingdom & glory, where they shall be for ever with him.
- XI. We Believe, yt Baptism & ye Lord's Supper are ordinances of Christ to be continued untill his second coming, & that the former is absolutely requisite to the latter, that is to say, that those onely are to be admitted into the communion of the Church, & to participate of all ordinances in it, who upon profession of their faith, have been baptised by immersion, in the name of the father, & of the son & of the holy ghost.
- XII. We also Believe, yt singing of psalms, Hymns and spiritual songs vocally, is an ordinance of the Gospel to be performed by believers, and that every one ought to be left to their liberty in using of it.

Now all & each of these doctrines & ordinances, we look upon our selves under ye greatest obligations to embrace, maintain & defend, believing it to be our duty to stand fast in one spirit, with one mind, striving together for ye faith of the Gospel.

And whereas we are very sensible, yt our conversation both in the world & in ye Church, ought to be as becometh ye Gospel of Christ, we judge it our incumbent duty to walk in wisdom towards them yt are without, to exercise a conscience void of offence towards God & men, by living soberly, righteously & Godly in this present world.

And as to our regards to each other, in our church communion, we esteem it our duty to walk with each other in all humility & brotherly love, to watch over each others conversation, to stir up one another to love & good works, not forsaking the assembling of our selves together as we have opportunity, to worship God according to his revealed will; & when the case requires, to warn, rebuke & admonish one another, according to the rules of the Gospel.

Moreover we think our selves obliged to sympathise with each other, in all conditions both inward & outward, which God in his providence, may bring us into, as also to bear with one another's weaknesses, failings & infirmities, & particularly to pray for one another, & yt the Gospel & the ordinances thereof might be blessed to the edification & comfort of each others souls, & for the gathering in others to christ, besides those who are already gathered.

All which duties we desire to be found in the performance of,

thro' the gracious assistance of the holy spirit, whilst we both admire & adore the grace, which has given us a place & a name in God's house better than that of sons & daughters.

Finis.

A copy of the Confession "LONDON: Printed in the Year, 1768," is now before me. It is annotated throughout with proof texts, the spelling has been corrected, the punctuation improved, and the following additions made:—

- II. At the end of the paragraph, add, "These three divine persons are distinguished from each other, by peculiar relative properties: The distinguishing character and relative property of the first person, is *begetting*; he has begotten a Son of the same nature with him, and who is the express image of his person; and therefore is with great propriety called *the Father*: The distinguishing character and relative property of the second person is that he is *begotten*; and he is called the only begotten of the Father, and his own proper Son; not a Son by creation as angels and men are nor by adoption as saints are, nor by office as civil magistrates are, but by nature, by the Father's eternal generation of him in the divine nature; and therefore he is truly called *the Son*: The distinguishing character and relative property of the third person is to be *breathed* by the Father and the Son, and to proceed from both, and is very properly called the *Spirit* or Breath of both: These three distinct divine persons, we profess to reverence, serve and worship as the one true God."
- IV. After "death" in last line but two insert "as considered in the first *Adam*, fallen and sinners;"
- V. After "humane nature" insert "and not before, neither in whole, nor in part, his human soul being a creature, existed not from eternity, but was created and formed in his body by him that forms the spirit of man within him, when that was conceived in the womb of the virgin; and so his human nature consists of a true body and a reasonable soul; both which, together, and at once the Son of God assumed into union with his divine person, when made of a woman and not before;"
- Alter "as their substitute" to "as the substitute of his people."
- XII. After "believers" omit "and that" and insert "but that as to time, place and manner,"
- The occasion of these additions is found in the minutes of "a full Church Meeting, Lord's Day, August 7th, 1768" when The Pastor reported that whereas it had been confidently affirmed that some errors that were creeping in

among us [at recent meetings one member had been removed from communion having "joyned with another Society not of the same faith and order," and a second member had been "rejected, removed and excluded" because "he declared he had been long at enmity with the doctrine of the Eternal Sonship of Christ by the Generation of the Father"] were not contrary to the Articles of the Church, he had therefore carefully revised them & found that there was no need to alter any clause or any word in them; But thought it proper with the approbation of the Church to add two or three clauses here & there in order the more to strengthen and explain the sense of them; and proposed to read them to the church which he accordingly did and which were agreed unto by them.

Such is this Confession drawn up two hundred years ago, and amended thirty-nine years later. It is strong meat, the diet of a master in Israel who thought deeply. But, to quote Spurgeon, "he cramped himself, and was therefore straitened where there was no scriptural reason for being so." The Confession lacks something that is found in the New Testament, and, if Gill were living to-day, there is little doubt that, with a spirit of freedom like to that he exercised two hundred years ago, he would refuse to be bound by his own credal expression. Possibly he would turn to the Declaration of Principle as printed in the Constitution (1926) of the Baptist Union and there find all that is needful to say.

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