

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.

(1 Timothy 3:16)

Brackenhurst Baptist Church is a member of Sola 5—an association of God-centred evangelical churches in Southern Africa. All member churches affirm Sola 5’s Confession of Faith, which can be viewed in its entirety on the Sola 5 website (<http://sola5.org/confession/>). For the next several months, we as a church will be taking time during FBH to discuss the Sola 5 Confession of Faith. Before we launch into that discussion, it will help to first establish the importance and benefits of a church affirming a particular Confession of Faith.

When the first Baptist churches were formed in the early 17th century, they were met with great disdain from the British government and existing Christian denominations. Our earliest Baptist brothers and sisters faced intense persecution, which was fuelled by gross misrepresentations of what Baptists believed. One early British opponent wrote of the Baptists, “They pollute our rivers with their filthy washings.” It was claimed, among other things, that Baptists subscribed to libertarian free will, denied original sin, baptised women in the nude, and opposed church and crown. Their opponents openly (but wrongly) associated the early Baptists with the more radical wing of the Anabaptist movement.

To combat these misrepresentations, and to show that Baptists were orthodox in faith and practice, representatives from seven Baptist congregations in London came together to draw up a common Confession of Faith. Published in 1644, and “corrected and enlarged” in 1646, the Confession was titled “A Confession of Faith of Seven Congregations or Churches of Christ in London, Which are Commonly (But Unjustly) Called Anabaptists.” This first Confession was very basic, written largely to defend the churches against charges of unorthodoxy and heresy. In 1677, a larger body of Baptist leaders came together to formulate a more comprehensive Confession. Because persecution against Baptists was still rife, the Confession was not formally published until 1689 (after the British Toleration Act). That second Confession is therefore commonly known as the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith or the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith. It is still widely used among Reformed Baptist Churches today. (The earliest Creeds were also used for confessions of martyrs and for baptismal confessions of faith.)

This history illustrates that the earliest Baptist Confessions were formulated to display the orthodoxy of Baptist convictions. Many Baptist denominations, associations, and conventions have formulated their own Confessions, and the desire to maintain Christian orthodoxy is always one goal in doing so.

It should be noted that this move to formulating concise Confessions is not without biblical precedent. Even within the New Testament, there are examples of shorthand explanations of the faith: Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3; 15:3–5; Philippians 2:6–11; 1 Timothy 3:16; etc.

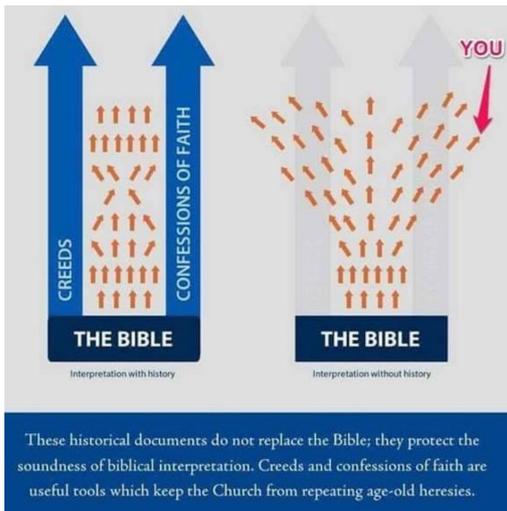
Sola 5’s Confession is really just an abridgement of the much more comprehensive 1689 Confession of Faith, with modernised language. It is a Confession to which BBC, as a member of Sola 5, subscribes, and to that end it is helpful for members of BBC to familiarise themselves with the Confession.

Here are four reasons we believe that a formal Confession—like the Sola 5 Confession of Faith—is important and why we believe that this study will be helpful to our church.

Guarded Orthodoxy

First, as we have seen, Confessions are designed to guard orthodoxy. Creeds and Confessions are not designed to replace the Bible, but to guard the soundness of biblical interpretation. They are useful tools to protect the church against embracing age-old heresies.

All orthodox Creeds and Confessions admit that they are subservient to, not equal to or above, the Bible. Nevertheless, the framers of the Confessions are men who have thought through biblical errors of the past and have framed their Confessions to guard against these errors.



While orthodox Confessions universally affirm that they are subservient to the Scriptures, there is at the same time a danger of subscribers to the Confessions elevating the Confessions above the authority that they actually carry. Confessions reflect scriptural authority only to the degree that they faithfully interpret the Scriptures. On the one hand, we must be careful of quickly casting aside the teaching of a well-constructed, orthodox Confession; on the other, if careful study of Scripture leads us to conclude that a particular facet of a Confession is not a faithful reflection of biblical truth, Scripture must trump Confession.

It is also important to remember that, while Confessions (like the Sola 5 Confession) are a reflection of biblical orthodoxy, they are not necessarily the standard of orthodoxy. It is possible to

disagree with a particular element of an orthodox Confession and still remain orthodox. (After all, the orthodox Confessions sometimes disagree with one another!)

A shared Confession provides something of an interpretive framework for churches and church members. If your interpretation of Scripture is radically opposed to the Confession that your church embraces, it gives you pause to reconsider your interpretation. It is certainly POSSIBLE that your Confession is wrong and you are correct (Confessions are, after all, fallible documents), but it may be more likely that your interpretation has been skewed.

Historical Continuity

Second, for a church to affirm an orthodox Confession of Faith places that church in continuity with centuries of churches that have gone before. For as long as the church has existed, Creeds and Confessions have been a part of church life. The tendency of some churches today to divorce themselves from an orthodox Confession is a radical departure from how God's churches have operated over the centuries. We want to be careful of thinking that we have so successfully worked through our beliefs that we don't need what churches before us have recognised they needed.

Assisted Unity

Third, the embrace of an orthodox Confession assists a church in maintaining unity both within its own membership and with churches of like faith. While we may not agree on every minute matter of interpretation, a common Confession assures us that we can enjoy likeminded fellowship with each other in the church and with other churches beyond our own. Sola 5 churches can enjoy great harmony, despite minute differences, because we confess a common faith.

Deepened Trust

Fourth, a common Confession helps us to trust one another when it comes to matters of ministry. If the church shares a common Confession (and common core values) and expects those who teach in its ministries to affirm these, it deepens the trust between members in matters of ministry. We can trust our Sunday school teachers and youth workers and ministry heads because we know that they believe what we believe. Similarly, we can trust that ministers sent to us by fellow Sola 5 churches will teach in keeping with Christian orthodoxy, because we share a common Confession.

For the above reasons, and perhaps more, we believe that there is benefit in us taking the time to slowly work our way through the Sola 5 Confession of Faith. We encourage you to familiarise yourself with it and to join us at FBH prepared for some robust and, we trust, edifying discussion as a confessing community.