

Confessional Clarity

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[0 : 0 0] Now, ordinarily, I might ask you to turn with me in your Bible, but instead I'll ask you! to turn with me in the 17th chapter of your copy of the 1689 Baptist Confession. And if you do not have one, there are plenty more available out on the table. As you'll see, the 17th chapter is titled Of the Perseverance of the Saints. That will be our study for the next several weeks.

Now, when I first began planning the study, I thought I would reorganize the chapter somewhat and address its various parts in a different order than what they appear. I thought that might be helpful by avoiding some amount of redundancy. If you scan the text, you'll see that some of the earlier parts are then expanded in later parts. But I've since changed my mind. Instead, I'd like to expound upon the entire chapter in order, phrase by phrase. So there will be some redundancy, perhaps, but that redundancy is actually intentional, and I think you'll see what I mean as we go along.

So as we move through this chapter of the Confession, I will always start with, not with turn with me in your Bible, but turn with me in the Confession. And for that reason, I want to begin by addressing a potential concern about that approach. You see, someone might argue that I'm reversing what should be our priority. Some might argue that I should always start with the Bible and consider any man-made writing like the Confession secondary. A few years ago, I was talking to a fellow brother in Christ, and we were discussing the 1689 Confession. And specifically, he was sharing with me his disagreements with it. And after a while, I began to notice that he was raising very strange objections to parts of the Confession that I knew he actually agreed with. And it finally occurred to me that his primary issue was not with the particulars of the Confession, but with the merits of a written Confession itself. Long story short, I finally asked him, do you object to the church having a formal written Confession of faith? That is, a written summary of what the church believes? And he said, yes. And he then made a statement that I've actually heard a few times before. He said, the church doesn't need a formal creed because we have the Bible. Sometimes the same sentiment is expressed as, no creed but the Bible, or even no creed but Christ. Now, there's a sense in which that sounds perfectly reasonable. The fear that some have is that a formal church confession could be elevated to the same level of authority as the Bible itself, if not raised above the Bible in our minds. But as I said to this brother, that's not the purpose of a creed or confession. In fact, most confessions, especially those emerging from the time of the Protestant Reformation, began with an entire chapter devoted to the sufficiency and authority of Scripture. So the authors and editors of these confessions themselves did not believe their writings supplanted the Bible, far from it. Through the confessions they created, they were merely answering the question, what do you believe the Bible teaches? And that's precisely what I told this brother. Yes, the Bible alone is our authority.

There's no question, or should be no question about that, and that is something the confession readily affirms. But I asked him, what would you do if someone came to you and asked, what do you believe the Bible teaches about choose your topic? Would you merely point to the Bible and say, well, have a look, it's all right there? Or would you tell them, I believe the Bible teaches, finish that sentence.

Well, the moment someone says, I believe, that's a creed. That's a confession. The only difference between him verbally telling someone what he believes the Bible teaches and, say, me holding to a formal historic confession of the church is that I have the convenience of handing someone a copy and saying, here it is. It's all laid out in an easy to digest, systematic way. In fact, you'll find every essential doctrine of the Bible right here along with many biblical references. So you can examine the Scriptures for yourself to see whether these things are so. In fact, we have examples of creedal statements in the Bible.

[5 : 27] Take, for instance, 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul writes, For I deliver to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. What is Paul doing there? Well, he's offering a formulaic summary of the gospel.

It's a fixed, concise statement of faith that can be easily memorized and recited. It has a clear structure consisting of three parts, death, burial, and resurrection. We might call this compact theology.

It's an easy way to memorize and summarize the gospel, that is, the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, it's something that can be passed on to other people. Paul delivered, he says, that which he received. Then he recites that which he received, which is the summary of the gospel.

Jesus died for our sins, which covers substitutionary atonement. He was buried, which covers the historical reality of his death. He was raised on the third day, which proves that Christ was victorious. He was accepted by God. And all of this was according to the Scriptures, which shows God's promises and prophecies were, in fact, fulfilled in Christ through his death and his resurrection.

Do you see how a short, creedal statement like that could be beneficial for the church? It's easy to remember. It covers the essentials. And most important for our purposes, it doesn't add anything to what the Bible reveals elsewhere. It merely summarizes what the Bible reveals elsewhere.

[7 : 32] And that's what a good confession is supposed to do. A good confession does not teach anything the Bible doesn't. It simply summarizes the teachings of the Bible for the benefit of the church.

I'll give you one more quick example. There are actually many creedal statements in the Bible, but in 2 Timothy 1, Paul tells the young minister, Timothy, follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Now, follow means to hold on to something.

Hold on to what? Well, Paul says, the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me. Pattern could be translated into form or formula. So notice, Paul doesn't stop at telling Timothy to hold on to the sound words or the sound doctrine. He specifically told him to hold on to his form or formula of sound doctrine. Paul is referring to a pattern or system of teachings, not just the teachings.

And I think that's instructive. Paul says, this is a word of faith.

Deuteronomy 6.4, grounds the identity of God's people in the identity of God himself in a manner that is confessional in both senses of the word, doctrinally as a statement of truth and liturgically as a public declaration of faith. The New Testament witnesses to a continuation of this pattern, which Paul's reference to sayings that are true and worthy of all acceptance by the church, and indeed his use of statements which have a creed-like quality. For example, 1 Timothy 1.15, 1 Timothy 3.16, Philippians 2.5-11. Paul's emphasis on faithful adherence to the form of apostolic teaching also reflects this, 2 Timothy 1.13. Truman goes on to talk about the use of confessions and creeds all throughout church history. So the Bible itself gives merit to the use of creeds.

[10 : 22] The church has always, from the beginning, used creeds. And as Christians living in the 21st century, we would be foolish to disregard those confessions written and honed over the course of more than 2,000 years. Think about it. They were forged in the fires of controversy. They were sharpened over time because of these various heresies that came up. When a need arose to better articulate a particular teaching of the Bible, very wise men, pastors, and theologians of the past found a way to do so. So when someone comes to me and asks, for example, what does the Bible teach about the Trinity, I can say, well, here's a summary from my church's confession. Oh, your church wrote a confession? No, thankfully, we didn't have to. We simply affirm this confession, which comes to us really from Christ and the apostles through many generations of the church, working to summarize and carefully articulate the most essential doctrines of the Christian faith. And of course, guard against heresies.

We're still traveling the same dangerous roads they walked, but you and I have the benefit of using the roadmaps they created and refined over so many, many years. I once made a list of reasons why every church should be a confessional church, and I think I ended up with about 30 reasons on it.

But among those was historical continuity. Now, this might sound strange to some people. I don't think it'll sound strange to you, but I have no interest in being a part of a hip, new, trendy church movement of any kind.

I really don't. I want a church that is first and foremost grounded in the Bible. If thus saith the Lord isn't central to everything the church does, I'm just not interested. Secondly, I want a church tied to history. And I've often found that these two things, Bible and history, rise or fall together in a church. This is really noticeable in the way pastors preach. When you hear a pastor who very faithfully and thoroughly expounds the Bible, almost inevitably you will hear him use real-life examples from church history in his sermons, or he'll be quoting theologians of the past. But when you hear a pastor who maybe tells a lot of jokes and hardly uses the Bible, chances are you will never hear him cite Augustine or Calvin or the Puritans, you won't detect much knowledge of church history in his sermons.

The reason history is so important is because the church did not pop up today in a vacuum. The family of God has met together and worshiped the same Savior, preaching the same gospel, teaching the same doctrines, experiencing the same trials, confronting the same errors, practicing the same practices for more than 2,000 years since the time of Christ.

[13 : 57] And just as we will be united to those saints in eternity, I want to be united to them now. I want to learn from them. I want to be encouraged by them.

Read the beginning of Acts. The Lord has never stopped working through his church, and he won't stop working through his church until the end of the age when he returns.

You and I are just one chapter in that ongoing story. And I don't know about you, but I don't start reading a book in the middle.

I start at the beginning. And I work my way forward because that helps me to understand those later chapters. The book of Hebrews, in chapter 13, encourages us to run the race that is set before us by reminding us that we have or that we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.

Who are those witnesses? How do they help us? Well, those are the saints that ran the race before we ever came along, and they finished the race well. And again, we look back to them, and we learn from them, and we can be encouraged by them.

[15 : 14] So we should want to be united to saints of the past. And holding to a historic confession such as the 1689 is a great way of doing that.

It reminds us that we're not the first ones to run this race. We're not innovating a new religion here. We are simply inheriting the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.

Jude 3. In fact, even the men who gave us the 1689 Baptist confession recognized this. They did not draft their confession from scratch.

They borrowed as much from the Congregationalist Savoy Declaration as possible, who borrowed as much from the Presbyterians' Westminster Confession as possible.

Why? Well, first of all, why reinvent the wheel? But second, by using as much as possible from those earlier confessions, they were essentially affirming their unity with the other Christians of their day.

[16 : 24] Of course, they had to make points of clarification. They had to write their Baptist distinctives into the confession, namely regarding baptism and church government.

But on the whole, the particular Baptists, as they were known, of the 17th century, did not want anyone to think they were some strange fringe group.

They were thoroughly orthodox, right along with the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians, and they were essentially saying, hey, we are with you in the essentials.

We are with you in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, even if we differ on a few secondary points. And that, by the way, makes a pretty good case for confessionalism, for the church holding to a particular confession.

You see, if a group of believers can come together and collectively affirm their agreement with the same confession, they have an even stronger point of unity, don't they?

[17 : 29] It gives them a shared theological foundation that provides clarity and unity and accountability. We can say to one another and to the wider watching world, this is what we believe the Bible teaches.

And you'll notice these summaries are not so short or vague to be unhelpful. The confessions that came out of the Protestant Reformation in particular are quite robust and quite clear.

And for those who are still tempted to say, well, why not just, why don't we just affirm our authority, affirm the authority of Scripture together and leave it at that?

Why isn't that enough? Well, by affirming a confession, we're not only saying that we believe in the authority of Scripture as articulated by the confession, but we are also saying we believe Scripture actually teaches something.

We believe the Bible lays out a pattern of sound words, as Paul said. Put another way, we don't have to assume each member of the church interprets these various essential doctrines of the Bible the same way.

[18 : 45] We can know because we're all affirming the same confession. More than a century ago, B.H. Carroll rightly observed, the modern cry, less creed and more liberty, is a degeneration from the vertebrate to the jellyfish, and it means more heresy.

Definitive truth does not create heresy. It only exposes and corrects. Shut off the creed, and the Christian world would fill up with heresy unsuspected and uncorrected, but nonetheless deadly.

And as more and more Christians and churches move away from confessionalism, that's precisely what we see happening. As I mentioned, there are many benefits to confessionalism, and I'll mention just two more.

First, having a confession is a great study help for Christians, as we're going to discover over the next several weeks. And second, a confession can be a great discipling tool for those inside and outside of the church.

Now, maybe defending the use of a confession isn't really necessary here, but I wanted to be clear about why our church holds to a particular confession and why we would make it the focus of our study.

[20 : 14] I also wanted to be clear about why I intend to expound upon the confession. In other words, I plan to go through this chapter, phrase by phrase, all the way through.

However, while I may start with the confession, I am not going to let the confession have the final word. We'll consider what the confession says, why it says what it says, but then we will certainly look to Scripture as our final authority to see whether the words of the confession are true.

Now, if you're looking at a copy of the 1689 Baptist Confession, chapter 17, you will see the title of the Perseverance of the Saints.

By the way, we may not even make it past the title today. You see, the mere mention of this subject is controversial.

Some would reject this doctrine outright. Others would readily embrace it, but they have a much different understanding of it than what is presented in this confession.

[21 : 28] I'll explain what I mean, but let me start with a concise definition of what I believe the Bible teaches, what the confession shows the Bible teaches regarding the perseverance of the saints.

And I'm borrowing this definition from Wayne Grudem in his systematic theology. He defines it this way. The perseverance of the saints means that all those who are truly born again will be kept by God's power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives.

And that only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again. In other words, if you are a genuine Christian, you will continue in the faith until the end.

If not, you were never a genuine Christian. Put another way, no one who is truly saved can ever become unsaved. And don't miss this, because it's absolutely critical to understanding the doctrine of perseverance.

The truly saved do not remain saved or continue in the faith until the end by their own power. They are kept, as Grudem says, by the power of God.

[22 : 48] Think of Philippians 1.6. I am sure of this, Paul says, that he, that is God, who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Now, some of us may have questions already. What about those passages in the Bible that suggest we can fall away? Aren't there biblical warnings to that effect?

If we're kept by God, does that mean we can continue sinning without eternal consequences? Lots of questions could pop up. Well, the confession addresses those questions and more.

But before we get there, I want to, I just want to illustrate how controversial and perhaps confusing this subject can be. So, it wasn't too long ago that I was listening to an episode of *Renewing Your Mind* by R.C. Sproul.

Now, Sproul would agree with the definition of perseverance that I've given. In fact, he would agree wholeheartedly with everything the 1689 Confession says about it.

[24 : 00] Yet, in the episode I was listening to, he says, he doesn't like to refer to the doctrine as perseverance of the saints. He prefers to call it preservation of the saints.

Why? Well, he believed it is more important to emphasize God's grace in keeping the saints than the fact that the saints inevitably as a result will persevere.

and I understand where he's coming from. Yet, you see, the church of my upbringing believed in the doctrines of salvation by grace, but they also rejected perseverance of the saints.

They certainly believed that once a person is saved, he or she will always be saved, but they did not believe that salvation would necessarily manifest itself through a life of faith and good works.

So, a saved person could never become unsaved, but that doesn't mean they'll persevere. So, they, like R.C. Sproul, prefer the term preservation of the saints.

[25 : 15] God will preserve his people even if they don't persevere. Now, the issue would be further complicated if we were to, say, bring in even more Christians from other denominations into the room and ask them about this doctrine.

Mention preservation and they might pull out their torches and pitchforks. Mention perseverance and they might affirm the doctrine on its face, but they might also have a much different understanding of it.

They might say, for instance, that they believe once saved, always saved, but if you were to press them on what that means, some would say, well, if a person made a profession of faith at some point, then they're saved.

End of story. They will always be saved. Is that biblical? Don't we have examples of people in the Bible who profess to believe but did not persevere, did not endure to the end, and what does the Bible say about those who don't endure to the end?

For reasons we'll explore soon enough, I believe the chapter of this title of the confession, of this doctrine, could be, and maybe should be, the perseverance and preservation of the saints.

[26 : 42] And I say that because they're inseparable. They're two sides of the same coin. The saints persevere because God preserves, and if God preserves, the saints will persevere.

Now, this subject is by no means a new controversy. To illustrate that point, let me very quickly walk you through about 500 years or so of church history.

And I do this primarily because it helps us understand the context of the confession itself. You know, what it says and why it says it in the way that it says it.

As well as, it helps us better understand our own context. Again, the church didn't pop up in the 21st century in a vacuum. Why do we believe what we believe while the church down the street believes something else regarding this doctrine?

Now, we could go all the way back into early church history, but let's start with the medieval church. So, at the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church vehemently, vehemently denied that a believer could possess any certainty of their salvation.

[28 : 00] In fact, in 1547, the Council of Trent formally adopted this position, and I quote, if anyone says that he will for certain with an absolute and infallible certainty have that great gift of perseverance, unto the end, let him be anathema.

Let him be cursed with God's judgment. You see, the church believed no one could presume to be eternally secure. That was sinful.

That was heresy to them. You could be saved one day and lose it the next. Now, maybe you could regain it, but that's assuming you didn't commit a so-called mortal sin that would prevent you from ever being saved again.

Their entire system of salvation was dependent on the efforts of people, not the gracious, preserving work of God.

Well, along comes Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. Now, you might be surprised to learn that Luther did not quite believe in this doctrine as later reformers would.

[29 : 17] He once said, even if he wants to, the believer cannot lose his salvation however much he sins unless he stops believing.

For no sin can condemn him save unbelief alone. So, his understanding was that a sinner is justified by faith alone, not works, and that he will be saved in the end through faith, not works, yet he could stop believing, which would condemn him.

In other words, whatever God might do to keep one of his saints, he will not prevent him necessarily from falling into willful disbelief. And if someone falls into willful disbelief, they are no longer saved, though they may have been a believer at one time.

lacking, lacked a little bit of clarity. Well, as I said, other reformers didn't agree with Luther on this point. John Calvin wrote much more precisely, those who fall away have never been thoroughly imbued with the knowledge of Christ, but only had a slight and passing taste of it.

In other words, a true believer will remain a believer, and someone who falls into willful, unbelief, persistent, steady, vehement, never was a true believer, despite all appearances.

[30 : 46] And Calvin certainly represents the vast, vast majority of Protestants during that time. But then, along comes Jacobus, Arminius, who challenged everything from the doctrine of God electing his people to the doctrine of perseverance.

Now, to be clear, Arminius was actually pretty cautious regarding perseverance. He was pretty quick to say that he had not reached a firm conclusion on the matter as to whether believers could fall away from the faith, but his followers were different.

In 1610, they wrote a formal creed that stated in no uncertain terms that one could, through negligence, forsake again the beginning of his life in Christ.

Christ. In other words, the Arminians argued that perseverance is entirely conditional, dependent on the believer's free will and cooperation with God's grace.

So, if a person continues in faith, he remains saved, but he can always turn away. And if he turns away, he falls from grace and he is condemned. So, practically speaking, it really wasn't that far removed from the Catholic understanding of perseverance and that a sinner's salvation was ultimately dependent upon the sinner himself.

[32 : 12] Well, the Calvinists came together eight years later, and they formalized their response to the Arminians. They wrote that God does not take his Holy Spirit from believers completely, even when they fall grievously, but by his word and spirit, he certainly and effectively renews them to repentance.

In fact, it's from them that we get the TULIP acronym, the Five Points of Calvinism. Of course, the P in the acronym stands for Perseverance of the Saints. Well, just one generation later, some of perhaps the sharpest theological minds came together, and over the course of six years, English Puritans wrote the Westminster Confession of Faith.

And here's what that confession says regarding the perseverance of the saints. They whom God hath accepted in his beloved can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end and be eternally saved.

Now, they certainly acknowledged that saints may, for a time, fall into sin and lose their sense of God's favor, but they were also clear that believers will ultimately be restored.

So, perseverance is not predicated on our own efforts, but on God's election, on Christ's intercession, on the Spirit's indwelling, and the covenant of grace which God will not break.

[33 : 57] So, in a word, it's infallible. It will always be effective through the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But that's what the Presbyterians had to say.

What about the Congregationalists? What about the Baptists? Well, their response was, amen. Amen. In fact, both the Congregationalists, as I pointed out, and the Baptists, use the Westminster Confession to craft their own confessions, changing as little as possible.

Regarding this chapter on perseverance, perhaps the most notable, maybe the only notable change comes in the very first line. The Westminster says, The 1689 Confession simply adds one phrase.

Listen. Those whom God has accepted in the Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by His Spirit, and given the precious faith of His elect, can neither totally nor finally fall from the state of grace.

The only change the Baptists made was to emphasize saving faith among those who will not fall away. It's been estimated, we have no way of knowing with the certainty, but it's been estimated that throughout the 17th century, at least among Protestants, the Westminster 1689 view of perseverance was held by at least 70%, quite possibly as high as 90% of churches.

[35 : 48] Now, things would certainly change throughout the centuries that followed, but following the Reformation, the Baptist Confession represented the majority's understanding of perseverance.

And, by the way, this doctrine in particular was important enough for those churches involved in the creation of the 1689 that they classified themselves as those, quote, owning the doctrine of personal election and final perseverance.

They used that phrase multiple times. as those owning the doctrine of personal election and final perseverance. In other words, they said, if you want to know who we are, we believe in God's sovereign election of his people and the final perseverance of the saints.

That's who we are in a nutshell. Israel. And this continued to be the predominant Baptist identity until maybe the middle of the 19th century.

I mean, the very first Baptist association here in the American colonies formally adopted the 1689 Confession, though they did add a couple of chapters, one on singing and another on the laying on of hands, and they called it the Philadelphia Confession.

[37 : 08] Same confession. But things started to change throughout the 19th century. Namely, churches began to emphasize emotional experiences in human decision and free will in salvation.

Churches abandoned the formal adoption of historical creeds and confessions, and along the way, perseverance got rebranded, if you will. They began to use terms like eternal security, or the more colloquial, once saved, always saved.

In other words, many churches lost the theological precision, the clarity that we had through the Reformation in those years that followed.

And all of this gave rise to so-called easy believism, or free grace theology, where someone could profess faith and supposedly be saved, but never sanctified.

They never change. They never become more and more conformed to the image of Christ. Yet, these groups may still believe in once saved, always saved. They still believe in eternal security.

[38 : 28] But for all of the obvious reasons, they no longer refer to the doctrine as perseverance of the saints. In other words, the saints don't need to persevere to be saved, in their understanding.

As B.H. Carroll said, shut off the creed, and the Christian world would fill up with heresy, unsuspected and uncorrected, but nonetheless deadly.

Jesus said, the one who endures to the end will be saved. It's pretty heartbreaking to think about how many people in this world have been given a false sense of assurance.

In short, the 1689 confession does, in fact, teach eternal security, or once saved, always saved. But I prefer to avoid these terms, because they don't mean what many people think they mean.

I would much rather use the title found here in our confession of the perseverance of the saints. Yet, I don't mind amending it to say of the perseverance and preservation of the saints.

[39 : 43] I am more than willing to compromise with R.C. Sproul. The point is, perseverance is a far more accurate term than once saved, always saved.

Now, lastly, in the three or four minutes we have remaining, I want to briefly explain why the doctrine of perseverance matters. Obviously, the church has been debating this for a long time.

We're still debating it. John MacArthur fueled a lot of the modern debate back in the 80s when he published his book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*. But I want us to understand that this is not merely an academic debate.

This is not an issue exclusively for theologians to discuss. This is really important for you, for me, for every other Christian to understand.

Why? I'll give you nine reasons, and I'm going to go through these real quickly. I wanted to make it an even ten, but I came up a little bit short. Maybe if I give it some more thought.

[40 : 54] And we will come back to these in the coming weeks, so if you don't catch them all, that's okay. Number one, assurance of salvation.

It grounds the believer's confidence, not in self, but in God's sustaining grace. Number two, endurance through trials.

It gives us the strength to press on, knowing that God will not abandon his people. Three, corrects false assurance.

It warns against shallow professions of faith that bear no fruit. Four, guards against legalism.

It teaches that salvation is preserved by God, not maintained by human effort. Five, encourages holiness.

[41 : 58] True perseverance includes a growing love for righteousness and a growing hatred for sin. Six, honors God's faithfulness.

It exalts the covenant-keeping character of God who finishes what he begins. Seven, frames apostasy biblically.

Eight, strengthens the church's teaching.

A right understanding keeps preaching and discipleship, both urgent as well as hope-filled. And number nine, equips us to counsel others.

It enables us to shepherd maybe doubting or suffering believers with greater clarity and care. Let's pray.

[43 : 08] Father, thank you for the clarity of your word and for the gift of those who have gone before us, who labored to summarize the truths of Scripture for the good of your church.

We bless you for the assurance that comes not from our strength, but from your steadfast love and your sovereign grace. Help us, Lord, to hold fast to Christ even as we rest in the knowledge that he is holding fast to us.

May the truth of your preservation take root in our hearts and bear fruit in our lives for the glory of your own sake. Keep us faithful, Lord.

Keep us humble and keep us looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. And it's in his name we pray. Amen.