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Contents

Editor's Note

Jonathan Leeman

Page 6

WHICH DOCUMENTS & WHY

Which Church Documents? And Why?

As unglamorous as church documents may be, they are a crucial component of a pastor's toolbox.

By Aaron Menikoff

Page 8

Church Planters, Don't Wait to Put Your Documents in Place!

Our church waited three years to put our documents in order, and we suffered for it.

By Joel Kurz

Page 12

How Our Church Has Found a Marriage Policy Useful

In the life of a church, we create policies to help guide us to practices that help our people. May our marriage policies do just that.

By Nick Gatzke

Page 16

5 Questions on Church Incorporation

Many pastors are forced to think through this potentially confusing topic. David Gibbs from the Christian Law Association provides some help.

By David Gibbs

Page 19

CONFESSIONS & COVENANTS

Confessions: Old or New?

Should you look for a historic confession that your church will align with, or adopt something written recently—or even write your own?

By Bobby Jamieson

Page 22

Confessions: Thick or Thin?

A good confession of faith builds a protective doctrinal house around a precious center: the gospel.

By Jonathan Leeman

Page 27

27 Ways to Use Your Confession and Covenant

The ways we can use Statements of Faith and Church Covenants in our churches are many, but what matters most is that if we have them, we use them to help each other follow Jesus.

By Garrett Kell

Page 33

On the Thorny Matter of Signatures and Assent

Should we risk agitating people by asking them to formally sign something? And what if someone wants to join, but is unsure of a doctrinal matter? Is submission enough, or is agreement necessary?

By Brad Wheeler

Page 37

CONSTITUTIONS & BY-LAWS

Why I Love My Book of Church Order

Saying that you love a polity manual like the *Book of Church Order* is like saying you love a calculator. It sounds wrong. But in my case, it's true.

By Guy Waters

Page 41

Your Constitution Is a Theological Document

A constitution is not just a technocratic document demanded by your state's tax office, nor a necessary evil for avoiding conflict in a church. It's a deeply theological and even spiritual document.

By Greg Gilbert

Page 44

Seven Tips for Writing (Or Revising) Your Church Constitution

Writing (or revising) your constitution is not really lawyer's work, and it need not be drudgery. In fact, it can and should be invigorating.

By Andrew Nichols and Matt Schmucker

Page 48

Two Pastors Who Chose To Renovate not Rewrite Their Constitutions

Don't give up on that old constitution just yet. Consider renovating it first.

By Mark Vroegop and Curtis Hill

Page 55

Not Them! Who You Don't Want to Revise Your Documents

Here are five kinds of people that you might be tempted to put on your document revision committee, but should avoid if at all possible.

By Mike McKinley

Page 59

Does Anyone Know Robert? Rules of Order in Church Members' Meetings

Rules of order helps to ensure that members' meetings flow smoothly. As formal as they might feel, they help to prevent fights and facilitate unity.

By Bob Johnson

Page 62

Dealing with Bad Documents

Very often a new pastor will find church documents like the ones ours had—unclear at best and heretical at worst.

By Greg Gilbert

Page 64



Jonathan Leeman

Editor's Note

“Scripture is the only document our church needs!” Have you ever thought that?

Okay, fine. But I have a few questions for you. First, who exactly would you say Jesus is, and can I get baptized in your church if I, like, totally disagree with you on his divinity?

Also, is it okay for me to call myself a member of your church and—you know—never, ever attend?

And—last question—who in your church, generally speaking, decides who the pastors are? I mean, does the church just kinda know? The Spirit tells them? Or, maybe, you personally speak for the Spirit!

Yes, Scripture should be a church's sole authority. But the confessions, covenants, and constitutions of a church articulate what the members agree the Scripture teaches on what they should believe, how they should live, and how they should be governed.

Church documents is a prosaic topic, to be sure. But they facilitate unity. They protect a church from being governed by the passions of the moment. And they force a congregation and its leaders to be careful, deliberate, reflective, and, hopefully, biblical. Not bad, for a boring old administrator's job.

To put it another way, church documents are *kind*. It is kind to tell people what you think up front. It is kind say what you will expect from them or how disagreements will be resolved.

Imagine a husband and wife, a year into marriage, realizing they have dramatically different views about commitment and faithfulness because they never bothered with vows. “Ah, that's just paperwork!” Or, imagine your boss asking you to do one thing when you thought your job was something else because you never had a job description.

This is what church documents are for—letting everyone know what their job is, and what covenant faithfulness looks like.

Believe it or not, we at 9Marks get questions about church documents perhaps as much as any other topic. And my guess is that a lot of our pastor-readers are not surprised. They know how crucial good documents are.

For reasons like these, we offer this edition of the 9Marks Journal to help you think through different aspects of confessions, covenants, and constitutions, as well as a couple of other documents. If you have follow up questions, try the 9Marks Mailbag, or just ask an older, wiser pastor! We pray this is useful.



By Aaron Menikoff

Which Church Documents? And Why?

As unglamorous as church documents may be, they are a crucial component of a pastor's toolbox. I want to focus on the importance of three: the confession of faith, church covenant, and constitution.

CONFESSION

A statement of faith is a summary of doctrinal beliefs. Christians in the early church benefited from the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creeds (AD 325, 381), and the Chalcedonian Creed (451). These brief and simple statements reflected the common, Christian faith in God and the gospel he delivered to us. A flurry of statements in the Reformation era unified Protestant churches in the gospel even as they articulated key differences over church government and baptism. The Augsburg Confession (1530), Westminster Confession (1546), Savoy Declaration (1658), and Second London Confession (1689) spelled out the doctrinal convictions of Lutherans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists, respectively.

Twenty-first century churches wisely build on this rich heritage by adopting their own statements of faith. Assent is typically a requirement for membership or leadership. Though you won't find, "Thou shalt adopt a statement of faith in your church" in the Pastoral Epistles, it remains a wise practice we foolishly reject.

A statement of faith is a gift to the church, and it's a gift to visitors who want to know what your church believes. Furthermore, visitors will be more inclined to trust you if you are straightforward about your doctrine. It's also a gift to teachers longing to faithfully handle the Word. A Sunday school teacher, aware of his church's statement of faith, may rightly conclude, "I shouldn't tell everyone in my class they must believe in a pre-tribulation rapture!" A statement of faith is a gift to elders who need wisdom to know when to bind someone's conscience: "Is there freedom to affirm same-sex marriage?" a member asks. "There is not," replies the elder. "We've studied the Bible on this and have summarized our view in our statement of faith. Please read that statement, and then we'll look at the Bible together to see why we've reached this conclusion." Finally, a statement of faith is a gift to every church member because it

highlights the doctrines that bind us together. After all, shared fellowship is only as deep as shared beliefs.

Of course, unlike the Bible, statements of faith are not inerrant. They can be emended for greater clarity. Many churches in recent years have, for example, added a statement articulating the biblical view of marriage.

Using a good statement of faith is like bowling with bumpers. Just as the bumpers keep the bowling ball on the lane, the statement of faith keeps us in line with truth so we don't veer too far in the wrong direction. The Bible alone is our authority. After Scripture, a quality statement of faith is an important tool to protect and encourage sound doctrine.

CHURCH COVENANT

Paul told Timothy, “watch your life and doctrine closely” (1 Tim 4:16). If a statement of faith is a synopsis of right doctrine, the covenant summarizes right living. The covenant aids church leaders and members by describing what a Christian life looks like. Proper use of a church covenant encourages members to take responsibility for each other's holiness.

After our statement of faith, I've found the church covenant to be most helpful in preparing Christians for church membership. They want to know not only what we believe, but also how we agree to live together. Walking through a church covenant is like a stroll through the park of sanctification. Those who don't like the view quickly discern this isn't the church for them.

We usually read the covenant aloud at my church when we celebrate the Lord's Supper. Though this practice isn't mandated by Scripture, self-examination is (1 Cor 11:28). What better way to do this than by remembering the promises we made to one another when we became members of this particular local church? We didn't just promise to believe certain things, we agreed to live a certain way.

A church covenant is chock-full of commitments, like those about personal integrity, brotherly love, and faithful evangelism. The pursuit of a godly life doesn't save us—that's the Spirit's work through the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. But a changed life is evidence of conversion, and keeping a church covenant front and center is a key way to keep sanctification front and center, too.

CONSTITUTION

In my state, a church that desires non-profit status must have a constitution that describes its rules. In that very practical sense, a church constitution is “necessary.” However, I want to tackle this issue from a slightly different angle. Even if the state did not require a constitution, I'd encourage us to have one anyway.

When Paul concluded his discussion of congregational worship with the statement, “all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Cor 14:40) he didn't mean the church should adopt a constitution. He simply insisted congregational meetings should be without the discord that comes when nobody knows who's in charge or what's happening next. Though a statement of faith can go a long way toward establishing this kind of order, a good constitution fleshes out very basic questions: Who is qualified to

be an elder or deacon? How are they chosen? Who handles the finances? Can membership be revoked?

Some consider such questions boring at best and unspiritual at worst. But clarity here helps sheep feel safe, especially those who have been abused by leadership in the past. A good pastor will tell his congregation, “If I ever commit to teach what is contrary to Scripture, you should get rid of me as quickly as you can.” A well-written constitution tells the congregation how to go about doing just that.

Jesus charged us to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt 1:16). We live in a world where churches come under attack from without and within. Churches committed to obeying Scripture will discipline their members for habitual, unrepentant sin. The procedures for excommunication will be found in a constitution and ought to be affirmed by every member before he or she joins the church. This won’t keep a disgruntled member from suing the church or elders for defamation (or worse), but it is one way to live wisely in a world that rejects biblical morality and may attack a faithful church.

A SHOUT-OUT FOR EVEN MORE DOCUMENTS

The statement of faith, church covenant, and constitution are the king, queen, and prince of church documents. But beyond this royal family, there are other documents worthy of your attention.

One way to love your children in the church (and their parents) is by adopting a child-protection policy. Child predators seek out unorganized children’s ministries. Failing to implement a child-protection policy is tantamount to neglecting your own children.

A church policy manual is another document worth considering. Important questions arise that are not addressed by a constitution. For example, what does your church do if there is a shortfall in receipts from tithes & offerings? What if there is an overage? What if Mrs. Smith wants to donate \$500 to build a fountain in the front yard? What if Bobby wants to send a letter to every member of the church raising money for his short-term mission trip? How do you handle benevolence requests? Is your facility open to the community during the week?

Every church will address questions like these sooner or later. The answers would clog up a church constitution making it cluttered and unwieldy. A good church policy manual can fill in the administrative gaps and save tons of time for leadership in the future. In summary, a good constitution facilitates unity in the church when it comes to making decisions. And there is nothing “spiritual” about disunity.

CONCLUSION

Most of us don’t like to think through church documents, especially since we know Jesus is coming back and there is evangelism and discipleship to be done. I agree this is exactly what you want your church focused on.

Nonetheless, it’s worth assembling quality church documents. Picture your evangelism and discipleship ministries as a sports car. Good church documents are like a smooth, solid road underneath the car. When that road is properly maintained, the car is freed up to race to the finish line. But without a first-

rate road, the car must slow down and may even need to pull over to replace a tire. Bad roads will inevitably disrupt even the best racecar.

Likewise, a church without good documents may be running fine right now, but without them you'll soon find yourself distracted from the main mission. So spend some time adopting, refining, and using church documents. In the long run it will help your church focus on what matters most, the gospel..

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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By Joel Kurz

Church Planters, Don't Wait to Put Your Documents in Place!

We waited three years to put our church documents in order, and we suffered for it.

We had a statement of faith—we needed one for funding—but we didn't know how to use it. No one ever encouraged us to adopt (and take seriously) a constitution or church covenant. Even if they did, I wouldn't have listened.

Church documents seemed outdated and rigid. I wanted to reach the people who these “other churches” weren't reaching. I wanted the people who didn't like the church, the people who were looking for something different.

Three years in, we put documents in place—and it was painful.

By that time, we'd attracted a group of people, many of whom disdained the local church. We knew that we were against legalistic and rigid churches, but we did not know what kind of church we wanted to become. Everything seemed up for discussion and debate, including the inerrancy of Scripture and substitutionary atonement. With no concept, or ability, to exercise church discipline, sin went unchecked. Challenges didn't work because everyone appealed to personal taste and would offer to “agree to disagree.”

After three years of this, it was pretty clear that we were sinking. If Jesus' prayer was for unity in the church, his request didn't seem to be answered in ours.

Finally, we put a few documents in place. Our statement of faith took a prominent role in establishing what the church believed the Bible teaches. After many conversations and much research, we

established a church constitution. We found a time-tested church covenant that simply outlined what the Bible requires of all believers.

And in the months to follow many people left, some angry, others frustrated.

So . . .

Church planters, don't wait three years to put some documents in place!

THE CHURCH IS A COUNTER-CULTURAL INSTITUTION

A restaurant may be organized a hundred different ways. The best of human wisdom can organize an excellent non-profit. But only Jesus can organize the local church. The Bible is where we find its organizing principles, and let me tell you: the church is *quite* the countercultural institution!

As you read the responsibilities that church members have for one another in passages like 1 Corinthians 5, or the leadership qualifications in 1 Timothy 3, you immediately get a profound sense that “flying by the seat of the pants” (as my mother would say) while organizing a new church just won't do. Without clear biblical guidelines, the new church plant may very well blend with pop-culture, and grow in less-than-helpful ways.

Theological Fuzziness

Drawing theological lines seems counterintuitive in our postmodern era. However, church plants don't naturally drift into orthodoxy. Not establishing doctrinal lines from the beginning causes the church to drift away from unity, integrity, and God's revealed truth. As a result, the budding church will likely be distracted by endless debates on core issues such as inerrancy and substitutionary atonement instead of engaging in what the planter *really* wants to engage in: mission!

Ecclesiological Squishiness

Who leads the church? Who is a church member and what's required of them? Who can serve in the church? Before our church organized, the diversity of answers we received to these questions was tremendous. Biblical church polity across the board is counter-cultural in society. Male eldership, congregational authority (for us Baptists), a baptized and regenerate church membership—these aren't ideas that we just come up with on our own. A church with no guiding principles on church government will likely guide themselves right out of biblical faithfulness.

Moral Ambiguity

What is required of a church member, and who determines this? A church plant, without documents, sets up their new flock for confusion. Can a cohabiting couple become members? Can a man living in clear, unrepentant sin serve in a public ministry? How do we handle a sister rebelling against Jesus?

Without clear biblical documents, church plants will drift toward legalism or licentiousness. Legalistically, they may place upon their members spiritual requirements that Jesus himself does not place upon them. Alternatively, their members may be given over to sin, having embraced an unchecked licentious lifestyle.

Because sinful people are called to plant and organize local churches, we need guiding principles that transcend human wisdom. We need biblical guidelines from the start.

THIS IS WHAT A CHURCH IS, AND WHO WE NEED TO BECOME

As a pastor, I often have the opportunity to counsel engaged couples. As part of our pre-marital counseling, I always explain in detail the expectations and requirements of marriage. Can you imagine someone getting married, and discovering the expectations and requirements of marriage three years later?

Lack of forethought and clarity as to *who* the church is, and *what* the church does, will lead to endless divisions. Responding to those divisions with documents (three years later) will feel reactionary and people will leave. Starting off with the documents will say from the get-go: *“This is what the church is, and this is what we need to become.”*

Having documents at the beginning says: “We’re a people of the Book.”

Sometimes people ask, *Isn’t the Bible enough?*

Well, in a sinless world, perhaps, we would all agree on what the Bible teaches. But in a fallen world various interpretations abound. Biblically saturated documents communicate that a church plant’s vision is to be “built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets” (Eph. 2:20).

By finally establishing documents, we were able to speak clearly to the people that God had given us, “This is what we believe the Bible says, and it’s on this foundation that we stand. We not only recognize the need for biblical church leadership, but we spell it out. Ultimately, our documents detail and cast a vision for who we as a church will become. We not only admit that the Bible calls for pastoral integrity, but we formally place ourselves under the accountability of the church. These documents will provide you, church, protection from renegade, spineless, and authoritarian church planters. We not only discuss what membership looks like but we detail what God requires of the Christian—and what we, as a church, expect. These documents provide instant help when dealing with unrepentant sin and church discipline cases. They provide a vision of discipleship of each of our church plant team members, as well as new converts. We not only preach Galatians 1:6 (that we must not turn to another gospel), but we use these tools to articulate what that one, true gospel is. These documents serve to protect the church from false teachers and wolves.”

TOOLS FOR DISCIPLESHIP

The Bible instructs churches to organize themselves in a way that flies in the face of current culture and fallen wisdom. Because of this, church plants need documents.

“We as a church grew significantly in spiritual health once we voted those (documents) in,” said one member who’s been with us since the beginning. It changed our church, and it changed our members. While some left, others responded positively, embraced the biblical vision, submitted themselves to the local church, and grew. Church planting is about making disciples, and documents are useful disciple-making tools..

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By Nick Gatzke

How Our Church Has Found a Marriage Policy Useful

The idea of adding another policy to our file folders, handbooks, or websites doesn't seem to be an attractive undertaking, especially when it's not one of the defining documents such as a constitution or doctrinal statement. However, beyond "the big two," one of the most useful church documents I've employed to date has been a marriage policy.

A marriage policy is a guiding document for the elders of the church that sets the goals and parameters for the practice of marriage in the life that church. Having a policy for such a relational endeavor like marriage might feel overly structured. But here are three reasons why I've found this type of policy to be helpful.

WHAT A MARRIAGE POLICY DOES

1. A marriage policy sets expectations.

Many people getting married don't know what to expect and they need someone to help them set their expectations appropriately. Others have unrealistic expectations and need to understand that they cannot simply customize the marriage preparation and the ceremony to their preferences. A policy helps set expectations from the beginning. This is especially important in our consumer-driven society that leads us to believe that we can set the terms or parameters for any type of activity or event in which we take part.

A helpful marriage policy will set the expectations for marriage preparation or pre-marital counseling. At our church, we usually meet with a couple 4-6 times before they get married and speak together about both the biblical descriptions of marriage and the practical realities of what a Christian marriage strives

to be. This takes some good, hard work, and setting the expectation for that work from the beginning is important.

Expectations for the wedding ceremony itself are important to clarify as well. Will the church allow a minister from another congregation to officiate? Will outside musicians be allowed to play? Can I write my own vows? More importantly, where do all of these details fit into the essence of the commitment being made? Succinct guidelines that set the framework for the ceremony will give clarity for what to expect.

2. A marriage policy heads off potential problems.

An important decision every church eldership will have to make is whether or not they will allow non-church attenders in their community to avail themselves of church resources and staff or if they will devote these resources solely to their membership.

This decision includes both theological and practical considerations. Theologically, some churches view the institution of marriage as a form of God's common grace to the world and are happy to participate in that institution of common grace. The Bible prohibits marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian, but they feel its silence on marriage between two non-Christians gives them freedom and even opportunity in counseling, investing in, and ultimately officiating a civil ceremony for these non-Christians. This is undertaken with the two goals of giving clear gospel witness and helping people in the community, even if they do not ultimately become Christians.

Conversely, some have argued that local churches do not "do weddings" but rather, they "institute Christian marriages." Consequently, they are only willing to officiate these ceremonies for their members because they have seen evidence of their Christian faith and, hence, are sure they are entering into a Christian marriage. Others broaden that circle slightly, performing weddings for regular attenders or children of members if they have expressed their faith in the Lord Jesus and their desire for their marriage to conform to the biblical pattern of Ephesians 5:22-33.

The practical considerations are related to the staff and resources of the church. Churches in small communities might have few requests to officiate weddings outside of their congregations per year, while churches in larger communities or vacation destinations, on the other hand, could have dozens. The church elders will need to decide if this is a wise allocation of their resources. The practical considerations should not trump those of a theological nature, but they need to be considered and outlined in the policy.

Having a marriage policy will head off a number of potential problems. One of the most significant of which is the relational tension and pressure from church members who want their family members or friends to get married in the church. Another is the ongoing pressure for the church to participate in homosexual weddings. Consistency in policy and practice will continue to uphold the importance of marriage and point to the nature of the wedding ceremony as a service of worship in which the local church gathers around two of their own, bearing witness to their vows and praising God for his work in bringing them together.

3. A marriage policy serves as a teaching tool.

The profound biblical and practical aspects of marriage are realities we think about and grow into throughout our lives. A marriage policy can serve to “set the table” for those conversations that will take place in marriage counseling and continue well into our years of marriage.

Having a policy and taking marriage preparation seriously communicates the high value that the church ascribes to marriage. In an age where many approach marriage with a cavalier attitude or as a temporary contract, we confess that marriage is something that should not be taken lightly. Consequently, the marriage policy at my church makes clear that couples are to remain sexually abstinent and living separately until marriage, in accordance with 1 Cor. 6:14-7:1. The policy also stipulates that any marriage must conform to the biblical guidelines on divorce and remarriage as found in Matt. 19 and 1 Cor. 7. The inclusion of these items will ideally encourage people to consider their desires in light of Scripture, while also preparing them for some of the conversation that will come.

SOME PRACTICAL THINGS TO CONSIDER

Keep it short (1-2 pages).

Like most policies, the longer it gets, the more likely the reader is to tune out. Succinct, easy to understand statements will help accomplish the purpose of the document.

Include biblical references.

In a time when many churches take different stances on marriage, it drives home the idea that marriages in your church are rooted in Scripture. Further, it points people to the Bible and gives them opportunity to learn as they review the policy more than once.

View the policy as an avenue for further conversation.

People will undoubtedly have questions; many will ask for clarification as to what the policy states. It's in these conversations that we can so often encourage our fellow Christians and correct any errant understandings. Discipling opportunities will happen in these venues. A two-page document could never plumb the depths of each individual's situation. Instead, let the document be a useful guideline for the real person-to-person ministry that we do in our churches.

CONCLUSION

It's a great privilege to pastor the people of God through all seasons of life. This is especially true in the exciting season of marriage. In the life of a church, we create policies to help guide us to practices that help our people. May our marriage policies do just that.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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By David Gibbs

5 Questions on Church Incorporation

Here are five common questions on the issue of church incorporation.

1. HOW DOES A CHURCH BECOME INCORPORATED?

Incorporation takes an affirmative action on the part of the church in order for it to be incorporated as a not-for-profit corporation under the laws of the state in which it is located. Typically, state law requires nothing more initially than that the church file “Articles of Incorporation” with the Secretary of State’s office. The state usually provides forms that are short and self-explanatory. Although the form meets the basic state criteria for filing, these forms often are inadequate for meeting the federal tax exemption requirements. Once the form is completed, it is to be sent to the Secretary of State’s office, along with the appropriate filing fee, where it will be filed by that office. Some states have agencies other than their Secretary of State that handle corporate filings. Once the articles of incorporation are filed, the church is officially incorporated. The church usually will be required to file an annual report with the appropriate state office, but this is only to ensure they have current information and is not something about which to be concerned.

There are some who believe that incorporating the church is the same as the church receiving a license from the state. The Christian Law Association does not believe such is the case. The term license means permission by competent authority to do an act which, without such permission, would be illegal. **You do not have to be incorporated in order to lawfully have church.** Therefore, the act of incorporating is not the same as accepting a license.

2. OTHER THAN THE ARTICLES OF INCORPORATION, ARE THERE OTHER DOCUMENTS WE NEED?

Yes. It is imperative that you have Bylaws (also referred to as a “church constitution” or “book of order”) to ensure the smooth operation of your church corporation. **Please remember that Bylaws are for internal use only, and you should not send them to the Secretary of State’s office when you file**

your Articles of Incorporation. In most instances, when there is a dispute as to the authority and duties of church officers, the court will look to the Bylaws to determine whether or not that officer acted within the scope of his duties. This is the most important document you will have because it sets out in detail the internal workings of your organization. A typical Nonprofit Corporation Act, for example, defines the term “bylaws” as “the code or codes of rules adopted for the regulation or management of the affairs of the corporation irrespective of the name or names by which such rules are designated.” It is vital that this document be prepared properly, and that you include all of the protections available to you to safeguard against many of the lawsuits which are being filed against churches today.

Your Bylaws are so important that they should be reviewed annually to ensure they properly reflect the way you want the church to function. We at CLA consider this document so important we update our *Sample Constitution and Bylaws* regularly to make certain we have defenses to the latest legal theories being used to sue churches. You can obtain a copy of our sample constitution by writing CLA at P.O. Box 8600, Mason, OH 45040, or by calling (888) 252-1969.

3. DOES THE LAW PROVIDE ANY IMMUNITY FROM PERSONAL LIABILITY FOR THE DIRECTORS AND OFFICERS OF AN INCORPORATED CHURCH?

Normally state law will provide protection for the directors and officers of nonprofit corporations, but **this immunity from civil liability is state-specific**. The most common type of statute immunizes uncompensated directors and officers from legal liability for any negligent act committed within the scope of their official duties. Willful misconduct is not protected. You should check your state law to determine what protections the law gives you as a pastor, deacon, or trustee.

4. DOES INCORPORATION PROTECT THE MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH FROM PERSONAL LIABILITY?

Generally, incorporation protects church members from personal liability. Of course, they may be sued for any tort they personally committed, but not for the actions of others within the corporation. A tort is a wrong causing injury to another person or property for which there is a civil remedy. The wrong may be intentional or accidental. For example, if Mr. Brown strikes someone with his fist, he can be sued personally for his actions. However, Mr. Smith, who also happens to be a member of the church where this took place, cannot be sued simply because he is a member of the church.

Individual members of an incorporated church are not held liable for the church’s obligations because as a corporation, the church is viewed as an entity which has a legal identity separate and distinct from its members, even though it is still controlled by its members. Therefore, the church can be sued in its own right. This separate identity insulates the members from liability. This same immunity is typically not available to members of unincorporated associations.

5. IF THE CHURCH INCORPORATES, IS IT PLACING ITSELF UNDER THE CONTROL OF THE STATE?

Many people believe that by incorporating they are, in effect, accepting a license from the state. We do not believe this to be the case, but each church must decide that issue for itself. In making this decision you should remember the definition of “license”: “The permission by competent authority to do an act which, without such permission, it would be illegal. . .” (*Black’s Law Dictionary*, Fifth Edition).

While it is true that incorporation places the church under those laws which govern corporations, it does not mean that the state has licensed you to preach. *You may form a church and preach the gospel regardless of whether your church is incorporated.* What it does mean is your church is now recognized by the state as a separate legal entity. The laws of the state leave it up to the discretion of the not-for-profit corporation to determine what officers it will have and what internal rules will govern its operation. These laws also leave it up to the corporation to determine how best to fulfill the purpose for which it was organized, so long as there is no breach of the law. Incorporating simply allows the church to enjoy the convenience of holding property in the church’s name, allows the church members to enjoy freedom from personal liability, and allows the church organization to continue in existence in spite of large fluctuations in membership and internal church disputes.

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

David Gibbs is the president and founder of the [Christian Law Association](#). Since 1969, CLA has been providing free legal assistance to Bible-believing churches and Christians who are experiencing difficulty in practicing their religious faith because of governmental regulation, intrusion, or prohibition in one form or another.

Contact the Christian Law Association free of charge for any legal help with your ministry by writing CLA at P.O. Box 8600, Mason, OH 45040, calling (888) 252-1969, or going to www.christianlaw.org.

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By Bobby Jamieson

Confessions: Old or New?

So, it's a statement of faith you want, is it? You've come to the right place. Here are some gorgeous vintage models—an 1833, a 1742, even a 1689. That one's not for everyone, but it sure has a devoted following.

What's that? You want something that's brand new? We've got some of those too, but there are a few things you should know about these newer models . . .

OLD OR NEW?

A statement of faith is a means by which a church publicly confesses its faith, works for unity in the truth, instructs its members in sound doctrine, and, when necessary, enacts discipline for gospel-denying error. Given all that, I think formal statements of faith are a good idea, and if you've made it this far, you probably do too.

But if you're an evangelical pastor looking to give a statement of faith a more meaningful role in your church's life, one of the questions you'll have to ask is, "Old or new?" Should you look for a historic confession that your church will align with, or adopt something written recently—or even write your own?

In this article I'll suggest a few pros and cons of using an older statement of faith—say, one written at least 150 years ago. Then I'll do the same for new ones, and conclude with a few practical suggestions for whichever route you choose. In this article I'm assuming the points Jonathan Leeman makes about thin vs. thick statements of faith. So if you haven't, you might want to read his piece first.

OLD STATEMENTS OF FAITH: PRO

These pros and cons of old statements of faith won't be true of every confession, or for every congregation. But here are a few pros worth considering.

1. Stood the Test of Time

First, an older statement of faith has stood the test of time. If enough churches have found it a useful tool for confessing their faith that it's still around, there's probably a reason why. If the wheel ain't broke, why reinvent it?

2. Strength in Numbers

Second, there's strength in numbers. I don't exactly mean "If it's good enough for First Baptist, it's good enough for us"—though again, we should consider what has proven helpful for other churches. Instead, by "strength in numbers" I mean the number of brains that helped craft the thing.

Most historic statements of faith are the product of many church leaders pushing and pulling and pruning and polishing until they found language that satisfied all parties. They usually guard against multiple errors on multiple fronts. They're dense and tight because many minds have subjected them to scrutiny.

Also, many historic statements of faith have roots in statements yet more historic. So, the 1833 New Hampshire confession has roots in the 1742 Philadelphia Confession, which revised the 1689 Second London confession, which revised the 1658 Savoy Declaration, which revised the 1646 Westminster Confession, and so on. Unlike some modern statements of faith, many historic ones that are still around didn't start from scratch.

3. Sign of Unity

Another "pro" of older confessions is that they are a sign of unity with the church throughout time. They offer one church-wide way to resist chronological snobbery and listen to the democracy of the dead. Our generation didn't invent Christianity. And in a culture obsessed with youth and novelty, to confess our faith in the same old way lots of Christians before us have makes an important point about the unchanging faith we confess.

4. Sometimes Rough Edges Are Good

Finally, sometimes rough edges are good. If historic confessions make claims that seem to us at best marginal and at worst flat-out wrong, it's worth slowing down to ponder the friction. Might it be that we've actually drifted away from key commitments that virtually all Christians throughout the ages have affirmed?

Doctrines such as divine simplicity and impassibility are often rejected by evangelicals—sometimes, I'd suggest, due to simple misunderstanding. But these doctrines were crucial to the early church's doctrine of the Trinity, were affirmed by the Reformers, and are articulated in classic Protestant confessions.

It may be that at a few key points we've simply come unstuck from the church's mainstream theological tradition. Patiently learning from these confessions, and leading our congregations to the point where we can confess these truths together, might make our theology more catholic in the best sense, and therefore all the more evangelical.

OLD STATEMENTS OF FAITH: CON

A few cautions about older statements of faith.

1. Difficult Language

First, many older statements of faith use archaic or technical language that will be difficult for many contemporary Christians to understand, especially new believers and those who speak English as an additional language. Certainly learning richer, tighter doctrinal language can be an aid to discipleship, but a ladder isn't any good if you can't reach the bottom rung.

2. More than your Congregation Can Chew?

With some older confessions, it's not just the language but the doctrinal and practical substance that might be more than your congregation can digest. Some historic statements, especially the more expansive ones, might call for a greater degree of doctrinal unity and specificity than your congregation can reasonably hope to attain. On more practical lines, some historic statements of faith will prescribe stances, such as on Sabbath observance, that your congregation is unlikely to follow.

If you're a pastor who eats a lot of red-meat theology for breakfast, I wouldn't at all discourage you from discipling your people with sound doctrine. But be careful not to push for a statement of faith that will prove a burden too great for them to bear.

WHAT ABOUT NEW?

What about new statements of faith? I won't repeat the flip side of the points I just made. As I see it, the primary gain with newer statements of faith is that they may speak more clearly and pointedly to issues that are contested today but weren't a hundred or three hundred years ago.

Further, a newer statement of faith, particularly one you write or heavily adapt, might provide a lot better "fit" with your congregation's cultural context and spiritual situation. That said, beware of thinking about that context and situation in minute-by-minute terms. What will serve your church three generations from now?

One pitfall of newer statements of faith is adopting something that wasn't originally intended to be a church's statement of faith. For instance, some churches use The Gospel Coalition's Statement of Faith as their own. But one problem with adopting a parachurch statement of faith as a local church's is that certain practical distinctives that churches need to agree on are deliberately left open. Will your church baptize only believers, or infants too? Will your church admit persons "baptized" in infancy to membership and the Lord's Supper, or not? The TGC statement deliberately doesn't say—because it doesn't need to.

WHAT TO DO?

So then, what to do? If this is a decision on your plate, here are a few possibilities to consider.

If you adopt an older statement of faith, consider whether a few brief edits or supplements might fit it better to your context. Even our Presbyterian brothers—the American ones, at least—changed the

Westminster Confession in 1788 to remove the civil magistrate's involvement in church affairs. Confessions of faith are standards, but standards subordinate to Scripture. I don't see any problem with saying, "We subscribe to a lightly modified version of the _____ Confession," as long as your modifications are indeed light.

If you're inclined to adopt an older statement, but are concerned about archaic language, consider simply modernizing, and perhaps abridging, a well-worn statement of faith.

If you adopt a newer statement of faith, or even write your own, I would highly recommend that you find tangible ways to affirm your church's unity and continuity with those who have confessed the faith throughout history. You might decide to corporately recite some of the classic ecumenical creeds in worship, or teach through them in Sunday School classes on doctrine.

In addition, like [Third Avenue Baptist](#) and others have done, you can explicitly affirm your church's commitment to one or more of the ecumenical Trinitarian and Christological creeds, in addition to your more modern, explicitly Protestant and evangelical statement.

THE POINT OF EVERY CONFESSION

The question of old vs. new is not necessarily either-or, all or nothing. I pray God would give you wisdom to navigate these decisions, and to remember that the point of every confession, old and new, is to aid the church's living act of confession. As John Webster puts it in *Confessing God*, "Before it is proposition or oath of allegiance, the confession of the church is a cry of acknowledgement of the unstoppable miracle of God's mercy."

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By Jonathan Leeman

Confessions: Thick or Thin?

Confessions of faith come in all sizes. You have comparatively thick ones (like the [Westminster Confession of Faith](#)), medium-thickness ones (like the [New Hampshire Confession](#)), and thin ones (like the statements of a few churches I'd rather not point you toward!).

The driving question behind the thickness or thinness of a statement of faith is, how much do Christians need to agree upon to be a church? Longer confessions imply more; shorter confessions imply less.

Either way, the underlying assumption is that a church's existence depends upon nothing if not its confession. Jesus said he would build his church on confessors confessing the right confession (Matt. 16:16-18). So what must be included in that confession for us to be a church?

THE SALVIFIC MINIMUM PLUS WHAT?

I assume that all Christians would affirm that we need to agree upon Peter's Matthew 16 confession—that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (v. 16). But what else? The nature of Scripture? The Trinity? A detailed account of the gospel and salvation? Providence? The work of the Spirit? The nature of the church and the ordinances? The end times?

The [2000 Baptist Faith and Message](#), which is used by many churches as well as the institutions of the SBC, has statements on evangelism and missions, education, stewardship, the Christian and the social order, peace and war, religious liberty, and the family. [Other ministries](#) confess that church members must abstain from alcohol, not wear casual clothes to church, and, if the church uses “taped” music, know “the background of the musicians and their testimony.”

BUILDING A PROTECTIVE HOUSE AROUND THE PRECIOUS CENTER

Nearly all churches require members to assent to more than just the bare minimum of what it takes to be saved, however that minimum might be construed. Even a comparatively thin statement, for instance,

might require a person to affirm the inerrancy of Scripture, and it's not immediately evident to me that someone *must* believe in Scripture's inerrancy to be saved.

After all, a good confession will try to build a doctrinal house around that salvific minimum. It will erect the doctrinal foundation, walls, and roof necessary for protecting that salvific center from the blazing sun of ignorance and torrential storms of heresy (see Eph. 4:14). In that sense, a good confession, in addition to affirming the bare minimum, tries to shepherd the church toward more mature understanding and unite it around a stronger structure.

For instance, my church's medium-sized [statement](#) (adapted from the New Hampshire Confession) spends 808 words explaining the nature of salvation under the subheadings "Of the Fall of Man," "Of the Way of Salvation," "Of Justification," "Of the Freeness of Salvation," "Of Grace in Regeneration," "Of Repentance and Faith," "Of God's Purpose of Grace," "Of the Righteous and the Wicked," and "Of the World to Come." Meanwhile, another much-more well-known [church](#) spends exactly 44 words covering the same terrain: "We believe Jesus died on the cross and shed His blood for our sins. We believe that salvation is found by placing our faith in what Jesus did for us on the cross. We believe Jesus rose from the dead and is coming again."

This church's statement, in my mind, captures the bare minimum of what is necessary to be saved. But how strong and safe do those 44 words make the church against the winds of cultural decline and false gospels? It might be helped, for instance, by this floorboard from my church's statement, which not only affirms faith but renounces works: "justification . . . is bestowed, not in consideration of any works of righteousness which we have done, but solely through faith in the Redeemer's blood." Or this exterior wall, which affirms not only Jesus' return but an endless separation: "the wicked will be adjudged to endless punishment, and the righteous to endless joy; and that this judgment will fix forever the final state of men in heaven or hell."

How deep the doctrinal foundation of a confession should be, and how thick the walls, is a judgment call. You don't want a cardboard shack that topples with the slightest gust of heterodoxy. But nor do you need Fort Knox.

WHO KEEPS THE CHURCH FAITHFUL?

Another factor which affects the thinness or thickness of a confession is the question of who in the church is finally responsible for maintaining a church's confessional faithfulness.

The governing documents of some churches give responsibility for maintaining faithfulness to the officers, which means the officers have the final authority to exclude or excommunicate. In such cases, the members are often required to affirm only a fairly minimal confession. Doctrinal fidelity does not depend upon them, after all, and so they don't need to personally erect the whole house around that precious salvific center. The officers are responsible for that.

When the documents give responsibility to the whole congregation for maintaining a church's doctrinal faithfulness, however, the church will probably want a slightly "thicker" confession for the members. *All* the flock must affirm *all* the confession because the flock is finally responsible for guarding that confession—the whole house.

As an example of the former model, the elders in a Presbyterian Church of America church must affirm the entire [Westminster Confession of Faith](#). Members, however, must merely say “yes” to these five questions (taken from the [Book of Church Order](#), 57-5):

1. Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?
2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?
3. Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?
4. Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?
5. Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the Church, and promise to study its purity and peace?

Notice that members of a PCA church don't have to affirm much, at least formally. There is no explicit reference to a doctrine of Scripture, the Trinity, substitution, justification, or the resurrection. In fact, they only have to affirm 36 words (not 44 or 808) describing and affirming the gospel (#2). Strictly speaking, then, an inerrancy-denying Arian who affirmed Christus Victor and denied penal substitution could say “yes” to these five questions and become a member of a PCA church.

At the same time, to be sure, these gospel specifics (substitution, resurrection, justification, etc.) belong to the church's overall confessional and historical context. Meaning: the elders must affirm the more expansive confession; the elders teach everyone joining the church from that confession; and any PCA elder worth his salt, when interviewing member candidates, will make sure that a person affirms the Trinity, substitutionary atonement, the resurrection, and so forth. So, typically, a slightly more substantive confession of faith is at least implied when a member-candidate makes these five vows.

But notice what's going on. In a non-congregational church, the church's confessional faithfulness depends finally upon the officer's faithfulness, which means a Presbyterian elder will affirm everything a Baptist church member affirms and more. But there is a wee bit more flexibility in the joints for what a member does or doesn't have to affirm. An elder or a session might not *like* it if a member candidate denies inerrancy, but they can decide to admit such a person to membership because the church's gospel faithfulness does not finally depend upon the members.

In a congregationalist conception, again, the whole church is responsible to protect the church's gospel doctrine. As such, Baptist churches, historically, have required every member to affirm not just the gospel, but the component pieces of the gospel (e.g. Trinity, substitution, resurrection, justification, faith alone, Jesus' return, etc.) as well as a few doctrines which are critical to protecting and maintaining the gospel over time (e.g. Scripture as inerrant revelation, believer's baptism). If you believe the people are responsible for guarding the gospel, you want to make sure they know what they are talking about!

SO . . . THICK OR THIN?

So how thick or thin should a church's confession of faith be? Well, the storms that a church will experience depend, to some measure, on the cultural weather patterns of where it's planted. A church next to a mosque in Dubai or just off Harvard Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts or down the street from the Vatican City in Rome will experience different types of winds. And churches today are experiencing different storms than churches yesterday. So though I prefer historical documents, for the reasons Bobby Jamieson presents [here](#), I do think we should be mindful of the dynamics of context.

Further, I'm convinced that every Christian occupies Adam's office of priest-king, which means every Christian is responsible to watch out for serpentine intruders (like Adam was supposed to do) and to keep the holy separate from the unholy (like the priests were to do), as Paul argues in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1. How then can one possibly think that the every Christian (and therefore the whole congregation) is not responsible for protecting the gospel and maintaining the church's gospel faithfulness! As [one book](#) I read puts it, to remove responsibility from the members is to fire them from their God-given job. It promotes complacency, nominalism, theological liberalism. Instead, I believe that Scripture teaches that all the saints are responsible to protect the faithfulness of churches, which means the whole congregation should affirm the entire statement of faith, and there should not be a separate statement for just elders.

More specifically, every member of a church should be asked to affirm those doctrines which help to protect the *what* of the gospel and the *who* of the gospel.

CONFESSIONS SHOULD INCLUDE...

1. Doctrines that Proclaim and Protect the What of the Gospel

Arguably, protecting the *what* of the gospel will mean including statements on the nature of God and the Trinity, the doctrine of humanity and the fall, Christ's person, Christ's work (substitution, justification), the Spirit's person and work, repentance and faith, sanctification and perseverance, Christ's return, and final judgment.

I also think it requires a statement on Scripture, by which we know all these things.

2. Doctrines that Proclaim and Protect the Who of the Gospel

Insofar as Scripture specifically authorizes churches to guard not just the gospel but the people of the gospel (e.g. Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5), churches need to be able to agree on what the church is and how the identity of the church is affirmed. Is the church, by design, a mixed community, consisting of believers and their children? Or is it, by design, an unmixed community, consisting only of believers? A group of Christians' answer to that question will dictate how they view baptism and the Lord's Supper. As such, I think confessions must also include some type of affirmation both on the church and the ordinances.

These days, more and more Western churches, feeling the pressure of changing sexual mores, have begun to include statements on biblical sexuality. Better, I think, would be to include some type of statement on how the Lordship of Christ and the call to repentance governs the entirety of a Christian's life, including a Christian's sexuality, finances, work, and so forth. A further word could then be spoken

in this context about sexuality belonging to marriage, marriage belonging to a man and a woman, and so forth. Framing the matter in this way places the ethical requirements *inside* of gospel beliefs, rather than privileging this one ethical claim to a place where it sits *alongside* of the gospel.

CONFESSIONS SHOULD NOT INCLUDE...

Additionally, confessions of faith should *not* include:

1. Doctrines on Matters where the What and the Who of the Gospel Are NOT at Stake

The *what* and the *who* of the gospel (I don't believe) are not at stake over whether or not God unilaterally elects individuals to salvation (though I think he does). In other words, I believe that both Calvinists and non-Calvinists should be able to join the same church. Now, you may disagree with me, and believe that one's position on Calvinism is essential to maintaining the gospel. If you do, then you should probably hardwire your position into your statement of faith.

Further, I don't believe that one's position on the millennium is critical for maintaining the gospel. As such, I wish all churches would remove such positions from their statements, and not divide the body of Christ over the millennium.

To be sure, all doctrine impinges on the gospel in some way. Ultimately, then, a church must make a judgment call: doctrines that impinge directly and immediately on the gospel should be included in the statement of faith (like justification or repentance and faith); doctrines that don't bear an immediate affect on the gospel or the salvific minimum can be left as places where church members agree to disagree (like the millennium).

But even if different churches will disagree about which doctrines fall on this side of the line or that, I would still recommend this is the question we should ask for what goes in and what stays out: is this particular doctrine close enough or important enough to the gospel that, to remove it from a church's confession, will quickly threaten the church's ability to remain a faithful gospel church? Does it play a critical role in holding the house together?

2. Matters of Christian Freedom

Finally, statements of faith should not divide the body of Christ over matters of Christian freedom. To do so, I believe, is to deny the gospel and undermine justification by faith alone. Forbidding members from drinking alcohol, for instance, is a clear example of this.

PLEASING GOLDBLOCKS

In the final analysis, a good confession of faith will probably please Goldilocks: not too thick and not too thin, but just right.

It should equip the saints for the work of the ministry in the building up the body of Christ, until we all reach unity in the faith, not tossed to and fro by the wind of every false doctrine and the waves of human cunning (Eph. 4:11-16).

It will shepherd, unify, protect, and guide. And on confessors confessing such confessions, Christ will build his church.

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By Garrett Kell

27 Ways to Use Your Confession and Covenant

As pastors, we know that it's important to not just have a Statement of Faith (SOF) and Church Covenant (CC), but to help our congregation understand *why* we have them and *how* we use them. They are not intended to be dusty documents that hang on a wall, but active aids in guarding the sound doctrine we've been entrusted with (2 Timothy 1:14).

What follows are a list of several ways you might consider using these documents in the life of your church. Our church does not use all of these, but we do use many of them.

Keep in mind, these documents must never be held on par with or in the place of Scripture. They are summaries of what the Bible says and ought to push us to open and value God's Word all the more.

PREPARING THE DOCUMENTS

1. As you prepare your documents, include Scripture references to not only show each teaching is rooted in the Word, but to aid future readers who will use the documents to study what God says on particular issues.
2. Consider adopting or at least incorporating historic and broadly embraced confessions and covenants. This unites you not only with like-minded believers in your day, but like-minded believers over the centuries. This is a humble posture that honors the Lord and the church he has been building since his resurrection.
3. Ensure your documents major on the majors and minor on the minors. It's unwise to include secondary beliefs (e.g. particular views of the millennium) and it is sinful to divide the body of Christ where the Bible doesn't, say, by restricting a particular Christian freedom (eg. forbidding alcohol or tobacco). Those issues should be taken up in personal discipling relationships.

4. Call the congregation to prayerfully support the elders as they review and prepare the documents for them to consider. This provides them with an important opportunity to “be in” on the process of formulating the documents.
5. Hire a good lawyer to examine your church’s SOF and CC before the church adopts them to ensure that the wording best protects you from legal issues down the road.
6. If you’re presenting the documents for the first time, take the process slowly and ensure that you teach through them thoroughly before the church officially votes on them. When we implemented them in our church we set aside nearly three months’ worth of Wednesday nights to teach through the SOF and CC, line by line, showing where the ideas came from in the Scriptures.

NEW MEMBERS CLASS

7. As someone applies for membership, we require him or her to go through a membership class during which the documents are presented. Prospective members must be in full agreement with these documents to be able to join the church. Pastoral wisdom will of course be needed in some cases, as some will hold to varying degrees of agreement.
8. Teaching through the church’s SOF and CC during a membership class is essential. This helps everyone who is coming into your church know plainly who the church is, what it believes, and how members are expected to live together as followers of Christ. I strongly recommend not short-circuiting this process by just having them read it on their own.
9. After someone has been taught the SOF and CC, the membership process encourages meetings with elders to discuss questions that may have arisen. This provides opportunity for members and elders to discuss any secondary issues an individual may have questions about.
10. Before a member is presented to the congregation for affirmation, we require them to sign the SOF and CC as a way of publicly affirming their agreement with the church’s understanding of the Scriptures.

FOR NEW CHRISTIANS

11. The SOF and CC serve as discipling tools for new Christians. A young man named Alvin became a Christian and another member took him through our church covenant line by line, looking up the references and discussing them in context. Doing this helped Alvin understand more about how the gospel moves us to obey Jesus and how that obedience should affect the life of the church.
12. The SOF and CC help introduce new believers to a whole host of doctrines that they would have previously been unfamiliar with.

REGULAR ENCOURAGEMENT

13. The SOF and CC can serve as discipling tools for your church. Whether it is family devotions, 1-on-1 discipling, small groups, or a Sunday school class, believers can be greatly edified by reading sections of the statements and then studying and applying the Scriptures from which the statements are taken.
14. Church members can encourage other believers by sending a note and thanking them for carrying out a particular aspect of the church covenant they have witnessed.
15. Pastors and Bible study leaders should consider referring to the SOF or CC when teaching through a related topic. The CC in particular serves to help the church consider certain applications of gospel truth to their walk with God. Doing this shows the relevance of the documents and reinforces the weight of the Scriptures they summarize.
16. Sections from the SOF can be read during a worship service as an element of the corporate worship. This may be especially appropriate on a Sunday when a particular doctrine is being taught or sung.
17. Sending out a line from the CC with a corresponding Scripture in the church's newsletter is a way of regularly keeping our responsibility toward one another before each other.
18. You may consider printing the SOF and CC in your church's membership directory as a way of aiding the regular prayers for one another.

ORDINANCES

19. Reading a selection from the SOF or CC before someone is baptized could serve to people draw clearer connections between how the person's public profession of faith fits into the faith and life of the church.
20. The CC can be read before taking the Lord's Supper as a way to remind the church of how they are to be following Jesus together. One brother testified that, when his church did this, he was convicted by a line that reads, "I will seek to share the gospel with my family and friends." After seeing that line afresh, he knew he needed to share the gospel with his brother who eventually trusted in Christ. The brother then shared with the church how God had used the covenant to move him to evangelize, which encouraged everyone.

MEMBERS' MEETINGS

21. Our church reads the CC at the beginning of every members meeting as a way of reminding each other of how the gospel calls us to live together as brothers and sisters in Christ.
22. We often remind each other as we are receiving members that we have biblical responsibilities toward each other that are laid out in the CC.

ELDERS & DEACONS

23. Use the SOF as part of the vetting process for new elders. A current elder could meet up with a prospective elder and read through each section to ensure that there are no questions or disagreements with the SOF.
24. When we install elders, we have them read elder vows, which include a promise to uphold the doctrine and practice of the church as summarized in the SOF and CC.
25. Our elders compose “Shepherd Statements” from time to time that explain our stance on particular issues (children and baptism, regular attendance, financial giving, etc). In these statements we reference not only Scripture, but also relevant portions of the SOF and CC.

CHURCH DISCIPLINE

26. A friend relayed to me that in trying to reach out to a wandering brother, he reminded him of a portion of the CC. He showed him the statement of promise to “walk together in love . . . exercising affectionate care and watchfulness over each other and faithfully admonishing one another when required.” He explained to him that when he joined the church, he not only agreed to the CC, but also desired that kind of loving and gracious accountability. Pray for this to impact his heart.
27. If a church discipline case arises, we will use the CC as one of the aids to instruct the church about why we are responding as we are. We want to show that the person in question has violated the commands of Jesus as summarized in our church covenant. That being said, I suggest that you lean most heavily on Scripture in these cases to ensure that the congregation and the offending person understand what God’s Word says.

The ways we can use Statements of Faith and Church Covenants in our churches are many, but what matters most is that if we have them, we use them to help each other follow Jesus more faithfully.

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By Brad Wheeler

On the Thorny Matter of Signatures and Assent

It was inevitable. I was expecting it, but that didn't mean I was prepared for it. And then it happened this week. The words tumbled out in a mix of agitation and incredulity: "*Why do I have to sign a piece of paper?*"

We were talking about membership, of course. And he was clearly perturbed by the implication that his informal relationship with Jesus was insufficient without formally committing to a body.

Should we risk agitating perfectly happy regular-attenders by asking them to formally sign anything? If so, what, and what's our rationale? And what if they really want to join, but are unsure of a doctrinal matter in our confessional statement? Is submission enough, or is agreement necessary?

THE CLOUDY WATERS OF PRUDENCE

These are just some of the practical questions every pastor must answer. And yet, as we do, we recognize we're wading into the deep and often cloudy waters of prudence. That individuals were converted, baptized, and folded meaningfully into the life of a church body is clear enough in the NT. Exactly *how* that process unfolded is less clear.

But if the power of the keys in Matthew 16 is to declare the "who" and the "what" of the gospel, then our confessional documents (the "what") and our membership process (the "who") are among the most important aspects of our church life.

So . . . should we require prospective members to sign anything in order to join? At one level, it's a silly question. Ask someone to sign a \$1.53 receipt for a Coke, and they won't give it a passing thought. But ask them to sign a membership covenant or a statement of faith, and it's like you're requesting their second kidney.

And there are of course other ways to give assent. We can tacitly assent to something by merely not opposing it. We can do so non-verbally with a nod of the head, or a shake of the hand. We can go further, and give verbal approval to something by saying “aye,” or “I agree.” Yet the signature goes a step further by codifying that agreement in a way that can be independently verified by others.

Therefore, though the Bible doesn’t explicitly require it, I think the practice of signing is generally wise, at least in a Western context. Like signing a check or an insurance form, signatures are what Westerners have used for thousands of years to say, “You can cash this promise. I’m good for it today, and I will be tomorrow as well.” It’s a way of giving great public durability to our words, and not make every public statement rely on the whims of the moment. And when it comes to church documents, we are not talking about money in an account, but something of far greater import: whether we agree with a church about the meaning of the gospel!

JUST A PIECE OF PAPER?

But doesn’t that reduce membership to “a piece of paper?” Not any more than marriage is reduced to a piece of paper when a couple signs their marriage certificate. The signature isn’t meaningless, for that signature is how we express our agreement before God and before others that we actually intend on fulfilling the commitments and promises we’re making. A signature forces people to stop and ask, “What am I consenting to?” “Do I actually agree with it?” “Will I live by it?” The signature encourages buy-in. It helps to ensure the individual understands, affirms, and thus *owns* it. It’s another way to make membership meaningful. (I’ll also say it’s useful in a secular court of law should any member seek to sue the church for libel or slander in the case of church discipline.)

And if someone objects, in my experience, it’s often not for theological reasons, but for moral ones. They don’t want to be held accountable. They may initially balk, saying something about how signatures aren’t in the Bible. But lean in a bit more, and usually what you’ll find is that they want to follow Jesus on their own terms. By signing, they recognize they’re making themselves both accountable to others and responsible for others.

WHAT NEEDS A SIGNATURE

So . . . *what should we ask new members to sign?* I would propose a statement of faith and a church covenant. The first outlines both what is necessary to be a Christian and what is necessary to meet together. And the second outlines how we agree to live out the Christian life. In other words, they define the two most important things about a church: what it believes and how it will live.

This is an argument to have relatively mere statements of faith. Disagreeing on justification by faith alone or the deity of Christ is the difference between heaven and hell. Disagreeing on eschatology is not.

That being said, there are some secondary matters that, while not necessary to salvation, are necessary for a church to settle so it can orderly gather. Baptism and polity come to mind. Will we baptize infants or not? Will we be episcopalian, presbyterian, or congregational in our government? One simply can’t punt on such questions. You will necessarily do one or the other.

Now there may be a few doctrines that don't fit into either of these categories, but for the spiritual health of the body you decide they ought to be in the statement of faith. Take perseverance. While I don't think that one who denies perseverance is necessarily in danger of damnation, I also don't want them leading a small group. The spiritual damage they could cause by their counsel is too great. The same may be true with gender roles. While I certainly believe egalitarians will gather around the great banquet of our King, both practically and theologically I have concerns about where that system of hermeneutics leads. A church will have to decide how many of these "non-essential" doctrines are pastorally important enough to risk dividing over. Inerrancy, perseverance, sexuality, and gender roles are a few that come to mind.

ARE EXCEPTIONS ALLOWED?

But what if one wants to take an exception on an article? Maybe they believe in annihilationism, or they're paedobaptist (covenantal kind) but they're been baptized and willing to "submit" to the ways Baptists do church. Can they do so? Is that okay?

Again, this is a judgment call, but I would counsel against this. As a congregationalist, after all, I believe it is the members who possess the responsibility to uphold the church's doctrine. Hopefully you see the trouble, then, of putting someone in charge of maintaining and protecting a doctrine one does not believe!

Keep your confessional document clear enough, and mere enough, such that you are happy to require agreement on every point of doctrine. If you're the only true Christian church within 300 miles, then I might think differently. But most of us are not in that position. So for the sake of body's unity, ensure those who join actually agree with what the church believes, and how it will live. To permit "exceptions" is to sow seeds of spiritual disunity that may blossom into full-blown division over time.

BUT WHAT ABOUT ELDERS?

But what if I desire my elders to be more theologically informed and united than the average member? Should I require a higher confessional bar for my leaders?

One can, but in my experience this breaks down practically. Fuller confessions necessarily contain more doctrines to quibble over, such as the Sabbath, or definite atonement. If those doctrines necessary to join are heartily believed, then focusing on the discipling ministry of the man may be more fruitful than parsing his understanding of infralapsarianism versus supralapsarianism.

FOR THE UNSURE CHRISTIAN

But what if a prospective member is unsure of a doctrine?

Should they not sign until they are 100% convinced of every word? I tell new members that they shouldn't have a *settled* or *settling* conviction against anything written. Some questions or doubts are okay, so long as they're not formed opinions in opposition.

CONCLUSION

As pastors, we're seeking to protect and foster the spiritual unity of the body entrusted to our care. By teaching clearly, drawing our theological boundaries carefully, and requiring clear buy-in from our members we go a large way toward securing that end.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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By Guy Waters

Why I Love My Book of Church Order

To most people, saying that you love a polity manual like the *Book of Church Order* (BCO) is like saying that you love your slide rule or your calculator. Functional, yes. But worthy of affection? I confess that, in my own experience, it wasn't love at first sight. I have had to grow to love the BCO of my denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). But after almost 20 years of reading our BCO, nearly 13 of them as a minister, I have developed a genuine affection for this royal blue, spiral-bound manual.

How do I love the BCO? Let me count the ways.

IT'S PRACTICAL

First, our *Book of Church Order* lays out standards and procedures covering the gamut of the church's life together. How does one go about establishing a new church? What are the duties of the local session (board of elders)? How does one examine a minister for ordination? What does one do when a minister wants to move from one congregation to another? What happens when someone raises an accusation against another person in the church? What may I do if I think that the elders have erred in a matter of theology or discipline?

Our BCO, like many other polity manuals, provides concise answers to such questions. The church should never be in the position of devising *ad hoc* standards and procedures to deal with the multitude of governance and disciplinary situations that routinely face her. Having agreed-upon rules helps to ensure consistency and equity on occasions when consistency and equity are most needed. When the church faces a stressful situation that threatens to fracture her often fragile unity, what a relief it is to have recourse to standards and procedures that are already in place, that we have previously agreed to follow, and therefore stand at a healthy remove from the particular situation before us. No set of rules, of course, can guarantee unity. But there is nothing like procedural anarchy to precipitate disunity in the church.

IT'S FULL OF OLD WISDOM

Second, our *Book of Church Order* is the fruit of the wisdom of generations of Presbyterian reflection and experience. The PCA's BCO traces its ancestry to the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (1789), which is indebted to earlier Scottish Presbyterian reflection on the church's government. The PCA's Historical Center has made available [a free resource](#) that allows anyone to trace the descent of every section of the PCA's BCO.

Of course, the antiquity of any given provision of the BCO does not make it right. Neither does the fact that a provision of our polity has enjoyed the consensus of the ages render it true. By the same token, we should not despise this heritage. The generations of our brothers and sisters in Christ who have gone before us have experienced the same kinds of trials and difficulties that we face in the church today. The rules that they have handed down to us were forged in the fires of trial and experience. To intentionally cut ourselves off from the biblical wisdom preserved in this heritage is to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. Do we dare presume that wisdom has begun only with our own generation? We need the gifts of earlier generations of believers no less than we need the gifts of our own generation of believers. Each generation of the church has the privilege and responsibility to conserve the best of the past and to pass it on to the next generation.

IT'S UNDER THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Third, our *Book of Church Order* is subject to Scripture. We do not print our BCO on golden plates but on three-ringed loose-leaf paper. We do this because virtually every year the church amends something. When the church becomes persuaded that some provision of the BCO is mistaken, we seek to perfect it in accordance with the light given us in the Bible. We often have vigorous and protracted debates along these lines in our presbyteries and at our General Assemblies. Some dismiss or even despair of such discussion. But I often find it heartening. After all, the church invests time and energy in these discussions because she cares about the authority of the Bible. She desires her corporate life to be conformed to the pattern that Jesus Christ, her Head and King, has given her in his Word.

To say that our BCO is subject to the Scripture does not mean that our BCO is a compilation of verses of Scripture strung together. It is to say that we intend our procedures and practices are to be "ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed" (Westminster Confession of Faith, I.6). In light of this conviction, the earliest American Presbyterian Forms of Government included biblical proof-texts in support of their specific provisions. This commitment to the Scripture has animated Presbyterian polity from the beginning and, by God's grace, continues in a number of Presbyterian bodies today.

CONCLUSION

So, that's why I love our BCO—so much so that I think all Christians could come to appreciate, if not love, the BCO. The BCO, after all, seeks to realize biblical ideals for the church that all Christians share. All Christians desire unity in the church. We want the church to express the unity that is ours in Christ, yet we know this unity does not happen by accident. It is the Spirit-blessed outcome of believers' efforts to apply the Word's teaching about unity in the church.

And our BCO is intended to foster just that work. All Christians desire to obey the biblical command to do “all things ... decently and in order” and “for building up” (1 Cor 14:40, 26). If order (not chaos) and edification (not tearing down) are pleasing to God, then we need to pursue order and edification in every department of the church’s life, including her government, discipline, and worship. That’s where the BCO has proven so beneficial to our denomination. And when unity, order, and edification prevail in the church, then love is constrained to praise Christ for these his mercies to his church. Why love the BCO? Because it’s a help to the love of Christ!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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By Greg Gilbert

Your Constitution Is a Theological Document

“**C**hurch constitution.” There—when I said that—you could just *feel* the spiritual and theological power roll over you, couldn’t you? Probably not. In fact, most people—even church leaders—don’t tend to think of their constitutions as theological documents at all, much less as something having any real spiritual value. That kind of worth is reserved for covenants (the promises we make to one another as church members) and statements of faith (the cherished doctrines of Christianity that we hold together to be true). Those are the kinds of thing you can give a breathy, meaningful sermonette about in your membership class!

RULES AND PROCESSES CAN BE SPIRITUAL AND THEOLOGICAL

But a constitution? How on earth can something as mundane and boring as *rules* and *processes* possibly qualify as theological, much less spiritual?

Well that’s the counterintuitive proposition I want to convince you of in this article—that your church constitution (or set of by-laws, if that’s what you call it) is a profoundly theological document and is therefore part of your church’s spiritual act of worship to King Jesus. The case comes together in a few steps:

First, we must recognize that, at its essence, a constitution is simply a definition of your church’s structures of authority. Most fundamentally, it defines who can do what and under what circumstances. So, for example, it defines who can nominate elders, who can elect elders, who can remove elders, who can adopt and amend a budget, who can remove a member of the church, who can change the church’s constitution, and probably dozens of other things. By its very nature, the church of Jesus Christ often needs to *do* things as a *corporate body*. A constitution defines how and by whom those things get done.

Second, it’s a basic scriptural truth that all authority in the church flows from Jesus the King. When I teach our church’s membership class on the constitution, I’ll often start with that question—“All authority in the church flows from where?” And I get all kinds of answers: the assembled congregation, the elders,

the senior pastor (if only!!), the convention, the bishop (!). But none of that is finally correct. Authority in the church—all of it—ultimately comes from King Jesus.

Third, it's important to recognize that the church is, at root, King Jesus's Embassy in this fallen world. Read Matthew 16, 18, and 28, and you'll see that once Peter becomes the first person to recognize in a saving fashion who Jesus really is, the King at once begins the royal work—this is what kings do—of organizing the people of his kingdom. So in Matthew 16 he *constitutes* (or *creates*) the church; in Matthew 18, he *charters* the church, granting it authority (symbolized by the keys of the kingdom) to speak in his name; and then in Matthew 28 he *commissions* it, telling it what it is to be accomplishing until he returns. Essentially, Jesus is exercising his royal prerogative as king to establish the Embassy of the Kingdom of Heaven in the world.

Fourth, like any king would, Jesus has given his embassy, the church, a set of instructions for how it is to organize and conduct itself until his return. Those instructions, of course, are found in the Bible. Now that's not to say the instructions are exhaustive in their detail. No king tells his ambassador *precisely* how to do *everything*; he simply gives some general instructions for how things are to be done. That's what we find in the Bible. Through his Spirit inspiring the apostles, the King tells us for example that churches should have elders, that they should have deacons, that they should preach the Word and administer the ordinances and identify members and exercise faithful church discipline, and other things as well. And because we are his embassy in the world, we are bound to obey those decrees from the King—that is, to make sure that our churches are organized faithfully according to the broad instructions the King has given.

But that raises a fifth issue, doesn't it? Like we mentioned before, the decree from the King gives *general* instructions; it doesn't give us all the particulars of how the King's instructions are to be carried out. For example, *how* is a church supposed to elect elders—by simple majority vote, by a supermajority, through some other process? *How* is it supposed to elect deacons, or adopt a budget? What *exactly* is the process of membership and church discipline supposed to look like?

MOVING FORWARD AS AMBASSADORS OF THE KING

Those questions aren't answered in every particular in the Bible. So how do we decide those questions? I'd suggest that it's through Spirit-directed wisdom exercised by the congregation itself. The church as a whole considers the clear instructions of the King as found in Scripture and then, led by the Spirit, tries to come to wise decisions about precisely *how* to carry out those instructions. In short, we try to act as faithful, obedient, and wise Ambassadors of our King. And the document that emerges from that—one that defines wise processes for how we will obey the king's instructions—is a church constitution.

Do you see then? A church's constitution is not just a technocratic document demanded by your state's tax office, nor is it just a necessary evil for trying to avoid or mitigate conflict in a church. It's a deeply theological and even spiritual document. That's because both the creation of it and the following of it are acts of worship; they represent our heartfelt efforts as a local church—as an Embassy of the High King of Heaven—to obey our beloved Sovereign.

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By Andrew Nichols & Matt Schmucker

Seven Tips for Writing (Or Revising) Your Church Constitution

You're planting a new church, so your "to do" list is long. But there is one constant. At the bottom, it always says: "draft the constitution." Those words stay at the bottom because, if you're honest, you're mildly afraid of the job—which seems better suited for a lawyer.

And if you're even more honest, the work seems, well, B-O-R-I-N-G.

Presented with the opportunity to (a) get to know some new neighbors, (b) spend time with your kids, (c) prepare a Bible study, (d) rearrange your sock drawer, or (e) draft the constitution, you'll pick (a)-(d) every time.

Or maybe you've been at your church awhile and have looked over the constitution (which some churches call the "by-laws"; we'll use "constitution"), and perhaps you've even relied on it a few times. But you've realized that, on the whole, it just doesn't reflect how your church works. And no wonder. Only a few of your members even know you *have* a constitution, and just one—you—knows where to find a copy. You know you probably should rework the thing some time. But really, who has the time when those socks need to be rearranged?

If these descriptions sound anything like you, we have good news. As two who recently helped plant a church and draft its constitution, we can say that writing (or revising) your constitution is not really lawyer's work, and it need not be drudgery. In fact, it can and should be invigorating. A church constitution is a powerful tool for bringing happiness to your people. It orders their life together according to the Word of God. Indeed, in our years as church leaders, we repeatedly have seen good, biblical constitutions yield rich dividends far beyond the work invested in drafting them.

To help you get started, here are seven tips for writing (or revising) your church constitution that we gleaned from writing ours. We'll focus largely on writing the document from the get-go, but you'll see that many of these principles apply to revising a constitution you've already been using (or not, as the case may be!).^[1]

1. CONSULT YOUR BIBLE LONG BEFORE YOU CONSULT A LAWYER.

This may surprise you (especially as one of us is a lawyer), but don't call a lawyer right away. Sure, the document will have a few legal implications, and eventually you should run it past a good corporate lawyer to be sure it satisfies state law and won't needlessly inflame the IRS. But a church constitution at heart is a biblical document. And as we witnessed firsthand in drafting our constitution, even a Christian lawyer may reach for a template written by an unbeliever with only secular organizations and state law in mind.

But Jesus didn't spill his blood for his church only to leave it governed by lawyers and legislators. He left elders to govern the church, following instructions in his infallible Word. We should consult the Word first!

Listen to Jonathan Edwards on this: "Whatever ways of constituting the church may to us seem fit, proper, and reasonable, the question is, not what constitution of Christ's church seems convenient to human wisdom, but what constitution is actually established by Christ's infinite wisdom."^[2] J. L. Reynolds, a Baptist leader from the nineteenth century, agreed: "The Scriptures are a sufficient rule of faith and practice. The principles of ecclesiastical polity are prescribed in them with all necessary comprehensiveness and clearness. The founder of the Church has provided better for its interests, than to commit its affairs to the control of fallible men."^[3]

In short, these men are saying, God's Word thoroughly equips us for "every" good work (2 Tim. 3:17)—including constituting our churches.

So, rather than texting your lawyer buddy, first grab your Bible, a pen, and a piece of paper (or, if you prefer, your laptop or tablet), and list the aspects of church order addressed in the New Testament. We'll even get you started. Does the New Testament address the formal purpose of the local church? Yes (see, e.g., Eph. 1:6). Does it address church discipline? Yes (see, e.g., Matt. 18:15-20). How about whether the church should meet regularly? Yes, that, too (see, e.g., Heb. 10:25). What offices the local church should recognize? Yup (see, e.g., 1 Tim. 3:1-13). How disputes should be resolved? Mmm hmm (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 6:1-11).

We could go on, but we trust you see the point. The Bible of course won't tell you, say, which accounting software to buy; but Reynolds was right: The principles of polity *are* prescribed in the Bible "with all necessary comprehensiveness and clearness." A constitution is nothing more than a specific description of how those principles will be applied in your local church. So begin with the Bible.

2. DON'T START FROM SCRATCH.

Begin with the Bible, but don't start from scratch. What we mean here is that, once you have your biblical thinking cap on, save time by consulting constitutions actually used by congregations that agree with you on basic organizational matters. See how those churches encapsulate the biblical teaching you've just reviewed, and even consider using a Word version of one of their documents as your starting template.

Being biblical does not necessarily require being inefficient, and it certainly does not require thinking you have all the answers.

Please note: We're not saying to *copy* one of those constitutions. Like people, each church body will have its oddities that need not (and sometimes should not) be imitated. And even otherwise healthy churches may be structured in ways that you conclude could be more biblically faithful.

In our case, we looked at several constitutions from familiar churches, and ultimately we chose as a starting template a document from a church outside of our closest network. We then tweaked that template to accord with our understanding of the New Testament.

3. ASK ELEMENTARY BIBLICAL QUESTIONS.

Which leads to our next point, which is to go *back* to the Bible—this time to ask really elementary questions concerning what you're seeing in the various constitutions laid out before you. And we do mean really elementary.

In our case, we noticed that several constitutions created an office of "senior pastor," with various "pastors" beneath him descending in rank and authority, followed by "elders" with still less authority by virtue of term limits and lack of the title of "pastor." But when we turned to the New Testament, we saw no example of a formally recognized "senior" or "lead" pastor—much less any instruction to create such an office, or subsidiary offices.

True, Timothy and Titus functionally exercised some authority over local churches (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:3-4, Tit. 1:5), but there is no evidence that they held formal *titles* placing them over, or ahead of, their fellow elders (assuming Timothy and Titus could be considered elders). Instead, their extra authority was derived from instructions from the Apostle Paul. If even *that* did not earn these men special titles, we reasoned, then it seemed more sensible to adopt the Apostle Peter's language and refer to all elders solely as "fellow elders in the Lord" (Pet. 5:1; cf. Matt. 23:8-11).

Similarly, we saw no distinction in the New Testament between "elders," "overseers," and "pastors." Yet several constitutions we reviewed consistently reserved the term "pastor" for paid elders, without offering any biblical warrant for this distinction. Which led us to ask: Why bake this extra-biblical distinction into our church's constitution? In our very word-choice, we did not want to encourage the congregation to see a difference between elders that we did not see—and, in turn, to give certain elders more formal authority (and work!) than God had given them by virtue of their gifts.

Accordingly, under our constitution, paid and unpaid elders alike are all “pastors” — period, full-stop. And the congregation has happily adopted that language, referring consistently to “Pastor Thabiti,” “Pastor Matt,” and “Pastor Jeremy,” even though only “Pastor Thabiti” is paid. We have already seen good fruit from this simple step, which has encouraged folks to trust all three men as real, full-fledged pastors by heeding their preaching, following their instruction, and seeking their counsel.

We trust, too, that giving each man an equal title will make it harder for Satan to “decapitate” the church by picking off the “senior pastor” with some especially powerful temptation. A pastor may fall (though we pray against it!), or indeed the Lord may call him home, but he will never be perceived as the “head” of the church by virtue of his special title—because we have no special titles.

In short, as you sample constitutions, take the opportunity to question your assumptions about how church is “done”—even on something as basic as elder titles. And especially where you see something unsupported by Scripture, pull on that thread.^[4]

4. THINK LONG-TERM.

In addition to looking down to the pages of Scripture, we recommend also looking forward into the future. Only God knows what tomorrow holds (James 4:14), yet he rewards careful planning (Prov. 21:5).

For us, this meant trying to imagine our fledgling church decades from now facing decline and spiritual sickness. Which led us to ask whether it should be easy or hard for the congregation to change the church’s leadership.

We could see arguments on both sides. In our zeal to draft a spare, elementally biblical constitution, we had lowered almost all requirements for church-wide decisions to a simple majority (see 2 Cor. 2:6). With this in mind, one brother commented that, if the church had indeed grown widely diseased, a bare majority of carnal, typically absent members could commandeer the church by pushing out any remaining faithful pastors (i.e., elders). The flip-side, another brother pointed out, was that a high bar for swapping out pastors could make it harder to heal the sick church—because even a majority of healthy members seeking to install new, faithful pastors could be trumped by an entrenched minority of carnal members.

Ultimately, the latter argument won the day, and with the exception of constitutional amendments, it was decided that all congregational decisions would be made by a majority vote. You may reach a different conclusion, and so may we down the road. The point here is simply to look forward and consider how a structure adopted today might work—or not work—should the seasons change.

5. MAKE CLEAR THAT IT WILL BE CHANGED.

As you may have noticed, we just mentioned changing the constitution we just adopted. Why? Do we lack confidence in all this work we’ve done? Not really. We’re just recalling J. L. Reynolds’s caution that “the founder of the Church has provided better for its interests, than to commit its affairs to the control of fallible men.”

Very simply, this means that our church constitutions must never become the functional equivalent of Holy Writ. They should be hard, but not effectively impossible, to change. As Protestants, we know that the church must be always reforming to reflect the Word of God—and this truth extends to church structures prescribed in our manmade constitutions.

To help folks remember this, we recommend teaching from the outset that the constitution is a tool, which inevitably will be modified to reflect more biblical judgments, changed circumstances, and wiser practices.

6. KEEP IT SHORT.

Given all we've said so far, you might think we're recommending that you write a book-length tome addressing every conceivable contingency. Just the opposite. We hope that all the time you spend drafting your constitution will pay off in a leaner, cleaner, more plain-language document that prospective members can easily digest and that you can use as a teaching handout.

A teaching handout—seriously? Yes. A long, jargon-ridden constitution left on the shelf is useless (except maybe to satisfy state regulators), but a tight, pithy constitution read and taught will shape the practice of the church—which of course is the whole point. So make it a short guide, not an exhaustive instruction manual. If you think that sounds impossible, consider that the U.S. Constitution has only 4,400 words!

To see what we mean by spare, let's return briefly to our working example of elder titles. Consider the following passage from our constitution's first paragraph on church officers:

The biblical offices in the church are elders and deacons, but the church is governed by the congregation. The biblical terms “elder,” “pastor,” and “overseer” are understood to refer to the same biblical office. All pastors-elders-overseers possess the authority and gifts of pastors, whether or not they are paid by the church.

Although surely not perfect, we think this is a pretty clear, straightforward way of introducing the topic of church officers to a wide audience. The sentences are short, the language ordinary.

But as this snippet also shows, short and simple need not mean harsh and cold. In fact, if you cut enough needless words and redundancies, you might even find you have room to add pastoral content. This happened to us. Our constitution was so brief that we were able to include the list of five emphases we hope will mark our congregation.^[5]

7. SEEK THE CONGREGATION'S CLOSE REVIEW

Finally (and briefly!), seek the congregation's close review, as to shirk review would misunderstand the purpose of adopting the constitution—which, again, is to shape the actual practice of the church. A constitution rammed through, as it were, is more likely to be ignored than a constitution patiently and with great consultation presented to the membership. It is also likely to be weaker because the congregation inevitably will see things you didn't!

In our case, we scheduled a series of public meetings where the document could be discussed and amendments could be proposed. This led to good discussion and helpful changes. With all thanks to God, it also seems to have secured the flock’s buy-in; the document was approved unanimously on the first vote.

Now, this won’t be the case in every church—especially if you’re not planting with a like-minded team, but instead are revitalizing an existing church. Even in that case, though, we urge you to be open with the flock and use the amendment process as a teaching opportunity, even if it takes extra time. And, yes, even if it means a failed vote or two.

* * * * *

So there they are—seven tips. We pray they bless you, and make that sock drawer look a *lot* less attractive.

And speaking of prayer, may we offer an eighth suggestion? Pray. Praise God for the privilege of serving him in such an important task, and for entrusting you with such a marvelous opportunity to bless your people. And ask for his blessing. For as with the human household, so with the household of God (Eph. 2:19; I Tim. 3:15): “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Ps. 127:1).

May God build our church homes with strong constitutions!

FOOTNOTES:

[1] For more on leading a church with existing, badly flawed documents, see G. Gilbert, *Dealing With Bad Church Documents* (available at: <http://9marks.org/article/dealing-bad-documents/>) (Feb. 26, 2010).

[2] *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 12 (New Haven: Yale, 1994), 265.

[3] J.L. Reynolds, *Church Polity or The Kingdom of Christ* in M. Dever, ed., *Polity* (Nine Marks Ministries, 2001), 305.

[4] In forgoing special elder titles, we are aware of Paul’s admonition that elders who rule well are worthy of “double honor,” a phrase that in context plainly refers to payment—as shown by the immediately preceding verses on payments to widows and the very next sentence, which explains, “[f]or the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’” I Tim. 5:18. Notably, none of the constitutions we consulted that distinguished between “elders” and “pastors” relied on this “double honor” passage—or, again, on any passage. For more on this issue of elder titles, see S. Wright, “The Case Against The Senior Pastor” (available at <http://9marks.org/article/journalcase-against-senior-pastor/>) (Aug. 29, 2011).

[5] The list reads as follows:

We aim especially to emphasize:

- (1) the message of the Gospel (1 Cor. 15:3-7);
- (2) ministries of mercy to meet physical needs (Luke 10:35-37; Titus 2:14, 3:8, 14; James 2:15-16);
- (3) helping men, women, and families mature according to God’s complementary design for men and

women in their own households (Gen. 2; Prov. 31; Eph. 5:15-6:9; Col. 3:15-4:1; 1 Tim. 5:1-22, 6:1-2; Titus 2:1-15; I Peter 2:11-3:9) and in the church, which is the household of God (Eph. 2:19, 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 4:17);

(4) multiplying Anacostia River Church as the Lord may allow by planting other churches in and around southeast Washington, D.C.; and

(5) sending missionaries around the world (Matt. 28:18-20; Rom. 10:15)..

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By Mark Vroegop & Curtis Hill

Two Pastors Who Chose To Renovate not Rewrite Their Constitutions

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By Mark Vroegop

The first home I purchased was the ugliest on the block. The pitted, flaking, and whitewashed cedar, along with a yellow door and lime green trim screamed, “No way!” But we fell in love with the house’s character and charm. We renovated every square inch, inside and out, and our neighbors noticed. In fact, while we were painting the house one day, a neighbor shouted, “Thanks! It looks so much better.”

There is something redemptive about a renovation project. I know not everyone agrees, and I’ve heard horror stories about a “money pit” house, but I think restoration projects create a different kind of beauty—one that connects to history.

The most historic aspect of a local assembly of believers is typically its constitution. And in terms of important documents, the church constitution stands apart from anything else except the Bible itself. A constitution defines the governance and limitations of how a group of people will function as a church. Church constitutions matter.

However, what served the church 50 or 150 years ago will likely need some updates or changes. When that time comes, is it better to start over? Should you completely re-write your constitution? Perhaps. Sometimes starting from scratch works well. Or maybe you should consider a renovation.

As a pastor who has renovated houses, churches, and constitutions, I’d like to offer five reasons for renovating your church’s constitution:

1. IT AFFIRMS THE PAST.

Every church has a history, and I often find new pastors have little regard for what happened prior to their installation. In the commendable desire to lead the church toward a new future, they forget that every church has an important and rich story of God's grace. By using the old constitution as a baseline or starting point, a pastor has the opportunity to build on the church's history instead of eclipsing it. Taking the best of the old constitution and renovating it can honor long-time church members and affirm the history of the church.

2. IT CLARIFIES WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT.

Theological and pastoral triage—determining the order of importance when it comes to church issues—is perhaps the most difficult task in pastoral leadership. All issues do not have the same necessity for change. For example, a significant doctrinal problem in a statement of faith should be treated differently than the percentage for a voting quorum. By renovating an old constitution, a pastor has the opportunity to help his church understand and appreciate which issues are more important than others. A constitutional revision is a great teaching moment for a church.

3. IT CREATES A CULTURE FOR FUTURE CHANGES.

Constitutions often become outdated and ineffective in churches with a history of infrequent change. Over time the document is virtually ignored, and the constitution only becomes relevant during a church crisis—the worst time to make any changes. Renovating the constitution helps a congregation realize that founding documents can and should be continually improved, setting a church on a healthy path for more changes in the future.

4. IT MODELS HUMILITY AND WISDOM.

Renovating a constitution provides church leaders an opportunity to demonstrate that brand-new is not always better. It allows a pastor to carefully consider what really must change, to listen to concerns over particular issues, and to choose a wise path forward. Sometimes a complete change will be required, but I think a constitutional revision presents a unique opportunity to demonstrate a humble spirit.

5. IT PACES CHANGE FOR UNITY.

Making a number of changes in a church, while necessary at times, can inadvertently create questions, fears, and even division. Renovating a constitution does not forestall this entirely, but it can provide the opportunity to pace changes over time for the sake of unity. A particularly divisive issue can be deferred for a future revision while other more agreeable issues can still be addressed immediately. The joy of moving forward in unity creates momentum for future changes. Oneness over time can yield great fruit, and renovating a constitution sets this up well.

Whether a home or a church constitution, renovations usually take longer and have their share of surprises. But I think they're worth considering. A church constitution with both history and contemporary relevance is a beautiful document. Who knows? You might even have a long-time member say, "Thanks! That's much better." So, don't give up on that old constitution just yet. Consider renovating it first.

* * * * *

By Curtis Hill

When I was called to serve as Senior Pastor of Ogletown Baptist Church, I along with many in our church recognized that we had not been tending to our governing organizational documents and structure as well as we needed to. Over time (in the absence of recognized elders), I asked the church to designate a “task force” of elder-qualified individuals (of which I was a part) to work on recommending polity changes to our congregation, as well to recommend revisions to our governing documents.

The work of the task force came through a series of recommendations over 18 months. Rather than do a massive one-stop overhaul of our constitution, we felt it would serve our congregation best to do it in a piecemeal fashion.

The essence of the revisions to date have been primarily in these areas:

- We proposed a revision to an article that stated our church documents (statement of faith, covenant, membership procedures, etc.) couldn’t be revised under any circumstance—ever. We sought legal expertise to determine the best path of action, and worked hard to explain to the congregation the necessity of revising this article to our constitution.
- Previously, the full text of our (inadequate) statement of faith was actually included in our constitution. Our task force felt it would be best to adopt the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 as our official statement of faith (thereby preventing us from needing to create a new one from scratch). We also have incorporated the statement of faith by reference, rather than having it in full text in our constitution.
- Previously, the full text of our (antiquated) church covenant was also included in our constitution. Drawing upon several covenants as helpful models, we crafted and proposed a significant revision of the covenant, and similarly to our statement of faith, incorporated it in our constitution only by reference.
- We revised articles pertaining to membership, particularly related to how members would be received and dismissed. We also addressed issues of the age of members (which previously had not been addressed, even as the church had an occasional history of baptizing and welcoming into voting membership children of very young ages). We also clarified the church restoration process as well as attendance expectations for members.

Each of these revisions were voted on and approved by well over ninety percent of our congregation, and God has used this work to clarify things and better protect the unity of our church

In the next 12-18 months, I could envision more revision to our constitution. We still have a long way to go in codifying some of the reforms and changes we have made. By working on this in a piecemeal fashion, I believe it has gone a long way to protect the unity of our church, even though I recognize the need to formalize and codify our new polity, policies, and procedures. My prayer (which has been answered) has been that God would protect our church and her unity until we are able to act wisely in implementing more changes and reforms as a congregation.

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By Mike McKinley

Not Them! Who You Don't Want to Revise Your Documents

From time to time a church may need to revise its foundational documents (statement of faith, covenant, by-laws, constitution, etc.). In normal cases, the leadership of the church (elders, deacons, or staff—depending on your polity) would be responsible for initiating and overseeing this process. But sometimes churches with an acute need to reform their documents lack the formal leadership infrastructure to walk the congregation through the process. If that is the case in your church, to whom should the church look for help?

Well, in the spirit of all that makes 9Marks great, we should start with the negative. Here are the five kinds of people that you might be tempted to put on your document revision committee, but should avoid if at all possible:

1. THE PERSON WITH A “PET” ISSUE.

Church documents have the effect of hard-wiring a certain view of church into the life of a congregation. So if you have people in your church who hold a theological position or a ministry distinctive that occupies a disproportionate place in their thinking, you probably do not want them to have a seat at the table when it comes to these kinds of conversations.

From time to time, we'll get someone in our church who thinks that Calvinism or a “family integrated” approach to church life should be universal in the congregation. While people are welcome to hold those positions personally, we intend for our congregation to be broader than that. We are content for there to be a diversity of views in the church on these issues. As a result, I wouldn't want someone who insists on a more narrow position to be part of determining the contents of our statement of faith or bylaws.

2. THE PROPORTIONAL-REPRESENTATION GUY.

Americans in particular often have a deep-seated egalitarian impulse. When it comes to making a decision for a large group of people, we naturally think that every kind of person must be represented fairly. This is while you'll see so many churches create committees comprised of people who represent all of the different demographics that are present in the congregation.

While there may be some wisdom in making sure different perspectives and strengths are accounted for, in the end that may not be a good way to create helpful church documents. Just because someone represents a particular demographic (old people, singles, young families, a certain ethnicity, a certain gender) does not mean that they will be able to help make good decisions for the church.

3. THE OUTLIER ON SOCIAL ISSUES.

Inevitably, your church's documents are going to describe a certain view of the world and the Christian's place in it. And in the interest of fairness, you might be tempted to look for a certain amount of diversity of opinions on your document revision committee. But if you have someone who has an outlying view on social issues (such as marriage, gender roles, or the nature of sexual sin), you do not want to set their handprints in the concrete of your church's foundation (metaphorically speaking).

4. THE "DOCTRINE DIVIDES" PERSON.

For some, theological distinctions are a distraction from the community of the church. But a church's statement of faith and by-laws actually help to build unity by clarifying not only what a church does and does not believe, but also how those beliefs play out in the life of the church. You can probably survive without clarity as long as there is never conflict or disagreement in your church. But if you find yourself in a time of disunity, you will be glad that your congregation has already decided and articulated what it believes about the faith and how it will handle a variety of situations. A person who does not see the value in such clarity will not be an asset to your team.

5. THE "EXECUTIVE."

Lots of churches assume that if you can run a company or make a lot of money, you will probably have similar results with whatever you put your hand to in the church. And while there may be *some* overlap in necessary skills, leadership in the church requires a different kind of wisdom. The priorities and values of the church are different from those of the workplace. If a person's only qualifications are that they are successful in business, you do not want them leading your church's efforts to revise its documents.

What all of these people have in common is that by virtue of temperament, perspective, or training, they may not be in a position to appreciate the nature of the decisions they are making. Re-working a church's documents requires sensitivity to a host of issues, such as: in what kinds of matters does a church need to allow a diversity of opinion among its members? Where must it *not* allow such diversity? How can a church's by-laws or constitution be structured to help preserve a church's unity or bring about peace in a time of conflict?

SO, INSTEAD . . .

So, what kind of person *do* you want to serve the church in such a capacity? Look for godly, mature (which is not the same thing as saying “old”) believers who love the church and think well about the Scriptures. You want people with practical and organizational wisdom, who have had experience leading people, and who are respected by the congregation as a whole. The perfect “church document revision team member” does not exist, of course. But starting with the right priorities is a whole lot better than starting with the wrong ones. If your church needs to put together such a team, take time to pray carefully for the Lord to raise up and reveal people who can serve the congregation well in this arena.

One final piece of advice: at some point in the process, you should engage a qualified lawyer. If you have such a lawyer in your congregation, that is great. If not, then I recommend you find one. It should be obvious that Scripture drives the content of our church documents. But those documents also help us to live well in the world, and so they ought to be in compliance with applicable laws (whenever possible) and they also ought to help protect the church against legal perils. A good lawyer can be used by God to protect the church from unnecessary legal troubles.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Mike McKinley is an author and the pastor of Sterling Park Baptist Church in Sterling, Virginia.



By Bob Johnson

Does Anyone Know Robert? Rules of Order in Church Members' Meetings

During college, I was looking for one more class to complete the hours needed for a minor in speech when I came across this course called “Parliamentary Procedure.” It sounded boring, but easy, so I signed up.

I had no idea what I was getting into. Parliamentary Procedure was the study of the rules used by large governing bodies such as Parliament, Congress, councils, and congregations in order to conduct business and make decisions. The instructor was the epitome of a stickler for details and this course was clearly in her lane. And while my hopes of blowing through this were quickly blown up, I learned a very critical lesson: whoever knows the rules of order controls the meeting.

HOW DO CONGREGATIONS MAKE DECISIONS?

Many of us are convinced that an elder-led, congregational-rule form of church governance is set forth in the New Testament. This means that the congregation is going to be involved at some level in the decisions of the church.

How exactly does that happen? No, seriously. How exactly does that happen? Can you make motions from the floor? Can you table a motion? Who has the authority to say when a motion is out of order? When can you cut off a discussion and vote? What you will discover is that whoever controls the rules of order controls the meeting. The person who controls the rules of order is the person who knows exactly what they are and how they work.

WHAT ARE RULES OF ORDER?

So, what are the rules of order? A popular code of conduct for governing meetings and facilitating decisions as a group is *Robert's Rules of Order*. In fact, it's rather common for churches to put a clause in their constitution that says that the members' meetings will operate according to Robert's Rules. Have you ever actually read them? Most people haven't, which is precisely the problem because the person who knows the rules of order can control the meeting and that person may not be the moderator and may not have the best interest of the church in mind.

So, when you are forming or updating the documents for your church, make certain that the rules for your members' meetings are clearly established in your constitution or in supporting documentation. Otherwise, your members' meeting is vulnerable to being hijacked. When that happens, then the actual issue that's being presented to the members is lost while arguments are made for the process.

SHOULD YOU USE ROBERT'S RULES OR SOMETHING ELSE?

Here is my brief suggestion: *Robert's Rules of Order* are too cumbersome and clumsy to be useful in a church members' meeting, and I would not encourage you to use them. But you should establish *some* rules of order and write them down. (Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, for instance, use's a highly simplified form or Robert's Rules they call "Bob's Rules.")

Keep them as concise as possible. The more complicated they are, the more people who best understand them can exploit them to get their way. Simple rules are harder to exploit, and they allow everyone to feel like they know what's going on.

Make them accessible to the congregation, but be absolutely certain that whoever moderates your meetings know them as well as anyone.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Why is this important?

Rules of order helps to ensure that members' meetings flow as smoothly as possible and are not derailed by arguments regarding procedure. As formal as they might feel, in a church of any size, they help to prevent fights, and facilitate unity.

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By Greg Gilbert

Dealing with Bad Documents

Editor's note: This article originally appeared in our 2011 Journal for "Young Pastors."

What do you do with bad documents? I don't mean an eviction notice or a parking ticket. I'm thinking about beginning a new pastorate and finding a convoluted constitution or a vague statement of faith.

Before the other elders and I led Third Avenue Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, through several significant reforms, we were faced with a pretty common situation: the church's governing documents—the statement of faith and constitution—were in dire need of change.

The constitution was a mess of outdated policies, most of which the church had long ignored. The statement of faith was even worse. Read honestly and straightforwardly, it could have been affirmed by someone who was either modalistic or Trinitarian. It read, "We believe in one God who reveals himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Does that mean God is three persons, or that he's one person who reveals himself over time with three different hats? The statement was also completely unconcerned with defining key issues. "We believe in justification," it said, which is great, but not very useful. Roman Catholics believe in justification, too. On top of all that, the fourteenth article of the statement of faith said something like this: "This statement of faith can never be changed."

Now what do you with that?

Sometimes Providence smiles on a new pastor, and he digs into the church's archives to find that, lo and behold, his congregation long ago adopted a nice Reformed-leaning-but-not-too-much statement of faith, a constitution that's well thought-out and still serviceable, and a covenant that avoids any patent weirdness. Sometimes that happens.

But not always. Very often a new pastor will find a statement of faith like our church had—unclear at best and heretical at worst. He'll find a constitution that reeks of having been written by a century's worth of committees reacting to one little bicker after another, and a covenant that will yield a community about as loving, holy, and happy as an episode of Happy Days.

So what do you do in that situation? How do you live with church documents that are flat bad, and how do you go about changing them? I can't speak to every situation, but let me offer three strategies I learned through our experience at Third Avenue:

IGNORE

You don't have to use a church document just because it's there in the old minutes. If you come into a situation where the statement of faith hasn't been used for decades, and you find out that it's intractably modalist, you don't have to excommunicate everyone who's not a modalist! You also don't have to panic and rush the church into changing it before they're ready to think about such things.

Let sleeping dogs lie, as they say. As a Christian pastor, you ought to have a good grasp on the gospel and on the whole counsel of God as it's taught in Scripture. Teach your congregation that truth. When the time's right, bring up the old statement of faith and help everyone recognize the need for changing it.

Of course, sometimes a bad document is actively used, and you can't leave it in the dusty minutes. In that case, your options are more limited. You can resign, you can teach, or you can try to convince the church to change it. That, by the way, is a good reason to take a close look at a church's governing documents before you accept a call to pastor it.

It's important to say here, too, that living with a bad constitution is harder to do than with a bad statement of faith. You can safely lay aside a statement of faith for awhile. With a constitution, however, legal issues come into play. In most organizations, ignoring a rule that's written in a constitution can only be done by unanimous consent. You can ignore a bad rule until someone calls you on it, but then you're bound by your organization's rules. At Third Avenue, for example, our constitution called for a six-month waiting period for amending the constitution—not to mention the eternal waiting period our founders tried to stick on the Statement of Faith! Well, no one in our church wanted to wait that long, in either case, so we moved forward by unanimous consent with a shorter and better process for amendment. Had anyone objected, though, we would have had no choice but to wait the required six months.

Ignoring can be a useful strategy sometimes, but you have to be careful with it, especially when it comes to standing rules. The culture of your church, the use or disuse of the document in question, and even the level of unity that prevails in your church on the particular question will determine whether this is a strategy you can safely—and honestly—adopt.

INTERPRET

If you have to use a flawed document for a while, put the best possible spin on it. That modalistic article in our statement of faith, for example, didn't have to be understood that way. If you worked hard enough and stuck a few extra words in brackets, you could cram it into an orthodox understanding of the Trinity. So that's what we did.

In our new member classes, we would explain that, yes, the statement could be read in a certain way, but that we as elders and we as a church did not in fact mean it that way. And that was true—none of us did. We're also quite sure the founders of our church didn't mean it that way, either, given who we know them to have been.

We also made it clear that just because a modalist (or a Roman Catholic, in another article) could affirm our statement of faith, that didn't mean a modalist (or a Roman Catholic) could join our church.

It wasn't a perfect solution, nor a permanent one, but it was sufficient until we could adopt a better statement of faith.

AUGMENT

We handled the modalist statement of faith, really, by augmenting it. Where the statement read "We believe in one God who reveals himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," we asked for something more than those bare words demand. We asked for a belief in one God who in fact is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and who reveals that truth in Scripture.

We did something similar with our statement on justification, which said, curtly, "We believe in justification." Those words, taken alone, don't demand much. But as church leaders we simply decided that we meant something really, really specific with those words. We meant justification by faith alone. And when a prospective church member came to sign the statement, we made sure they meant the same thing.

Another example of augmentation: In Third Avenue's constitution, the role of the deacons was clearly laid out. They were to distribute benevolence funds and pretty much nothing else. At some point along the way, however, it became clear to everyone that the church was going to need strong leadership from an elder-like group of men. Therefore, we as deacons started functioning like elders. The constitution didn't call us elders, and it didn't explicitly give the deacons spiritual oversight of the church (that was reserved for the senior pastor). But the pastor wanted us to function like that, and so we did.

Again, you have to be wise and careful here. But there are often many things a pastor can do to begin changing a church's culture that don't involve the difficult process of changing the documents.

CHANGE

If you can, you ultimately want to change your bad documents for good ones. Often this is a long, laborious process, one filled with conflict after defeat after disappointment. That's how it was for us at Third Avenue. The first time we tried to change our constitution, it failed—and it took us another year to recover from that failure. I still remember laying on the floor at the home of a fellow deacon that night after the meeting, staring at the ceiling and wondering what on earth we were going to do.

Then a little over a year later, after the constitution had finally passed and we wanted to change the statement of faith, we ended up having to pull our new statement of faith back after formally introducing it, starting the whole process over again. Some of our difficulties were born of pure stupidity on our part. But others were just part of the normal, difficult process of leading a church through change.

When it works, though, reforming an old church is sweet. I remember the night that we finally implemented Third Avenue's new constitution. We'd adopted it two months earlier, and the last step, which would truly kick the new document into gear, was to elect three elders. When the vote tally was read, the man who had been chairman of our deacons and moderator of the "business meeting" called a five minute recess so the new elders could hastily elect a new chairman, who was now constitutionally directed to moderate the meeting. When we reassembled, the old moderator stepped down, the new moderator stepped up, and the church—now assembled in a "Members' Meeting," no longer just a "business meeting"—applauded, long and loud.

What a sweet moment that was!

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