

# Why a Statement of Faith?

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I recently learned of a church that was proposing at its annual business meeting a new statement of faith. Though this church (not one in the Association) has existed for many years and has had a large membership, it had never formalized its doctrinal positions, other than a few brief, general statements.

I found this status of not having a statement of faith hard to believe. I knew the leadership in this church to be theologically sound, competent preachers and teachers of the Word. Apparently they assumed that the church's doctrinal integrity could be maintained by an oral tradition of good teaching. They may have been attempting to circumvent disagreement among factions within the church who held contrary views on some points of theology.

Gradually over the years the ambiguity of the theological position, joined by a desire to reach people in a mushrooming community and the lack of a careful membership screening procedure, had created a congregation with a fairly wide range of doctrinal opinion. The theory was that good instruction from the pulpit would persuade people to embrace a common theology, thus avoiding confusion and error.

The theory, however, was flawed. It did not take seriously the inevitability of pastoral leadership turnover. It naively assumed that the congregation would somehow perpetuate the oral tradition by a spirit of Christian loyalty, charity, and humility. It did not take into account decisions regarding the selection of missionaries to support, curriculum to use, cooperative relationships with other churches and ministries to determine, teachers to assign to classes and Bible studies, materials to distribute, and the challenge of selecting compatible pastors.

A Bible based statement of faith is essential in guarding the integrity of a church or ministry organization. While the Bible is the final authority for faith and practice, clarifying what people believe about the Bible is essential. Doctrinal statements serve that purpose. One reality that the record of church history clearly reveals is that people hold differing views on what the Bible teaches.

Baptists have periodically expressed their faith in formalized statements called "confessions." Among the more notable are the London Confession of 1644, the Philadelphia Confession of 1742, and the New Hampshire Confession of 1833. Confessions are "we believe" statements. Confessions serve valuable roles as documents for perpetuating a body's heritage, as standards for assessing continuing theological soundness of the constituent members, and as tools for screening interested prospects.

A statement of faith is not worth more than the paper on which it is written without a concerted effort to hold people accountable. It must not be archived in a forgotten file. Rather it should be a document used in membership classes when newcomers are oriented, in committee meetings when curriculum and teachers are selected, and in the screening process when perspective pastors and deacons are considered. A statement of faith should be kept close at hand as a valuable resource for answering the question of whether we are on the same theological page.

A doctrinal statement is not infallible. It has limitations. It is the product of someone's study—not divinely inspired, as are the Scriptures. It can be subject to interpretation. It does not define every "jot or tittle" of theology and practice. Whenever humans make choices necessitating wisdom and discernment, inevitable subjectivism is introduced. Despite its imperfections and inadequacies, a well-written and Biblically sound statement of faith serves an integral part in preserving the stability and continuing viability of a church or ministry organization. When is the last time you looked at your church's statement of faith?