

CONSTITUTION OF THE ASSOCIATION OF CONFESSIONAL REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCHES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

PREAMBLE

Churches of the same faith and gospel order, as they all have drunk of the one and same Spirit, are branches of the one and same body and hold to the one and same head, and have one Lord, one faith, and one baptism; may and ought to have and enjoy voluntary fellowship and friendly association together, as opportunity may arise. Therefore, in the discharge of those relative duties that may tend to the mutual benefit and edification of all of Christ's churches (1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 4:5; John 17:20-26), confessional Reformed Baptist churches in the United Kingdom have come together to form a national association of churches. The name of the association will be the Association of Confessional Baptist Churches, UK.

I. THE NATURE OF AN ASSOCIATION OF CHURCHES

1. The practice of churches formally and informally associating is demonstrated for us in the Scriptures by the apostolic practice of Acts 15 and the precedent established by various New Testament churches (Galatians 1:2; 1:22; Colossians 4:13-18). Associationalism is also supported by numerous historical examples, most especially the practice of our Baptist forefathers in the 2nd London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 (2LCF) 26.14-15. The spirit of the gospel and Christian prudence further encourage the practice of associating together.
2. The many needs of the churches, such as mutual encouragement and support, assistance of various kinds, edification, and cooperative efforts to advance Christ's kingdom in the UK and beyond, also bring about the need for an association of churches.
3. An association consists of particular churches that have voluntarily agreed to associate together, being united by a common confession, to participate in the promotion of the gospel according to the interests they hold in common.

II. THE DOCTRINAL STATEMENT OF THE ASSOCIATION

1. We hold tenaciously to the inerrant and infallible word of God as found in the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments in the Holy Bible. This is the one, only, full, final, and sufficient authority in all saving knowledge, faith, and practice.
2. We embrace and adopt as our subordinate standard the 2nd London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 as an accurate expression and summary of that system of doctrine taught in the Holy Bible. Therefore, the 2LCF is the doctrinal standard of the association, to which we all fully subscribe.

III. THE PURPOSE OF THE ASSOCIATION

1. To show the visible unity of Christ's churches to the world, without respect of size or influence, and prays for the good and prosperity of all the churches and their members, not a select few. (John 17:20-26; Ephesians 4:4-6; Philippians 4:2&3)
2. To advance and secure in every way the interests of Christ's kingdom. (Acts 28:30-31; Col. 1:13)
3. To gain a greater knowledge of, a closer communion with, and a deeper love for likeminded churches. (Colossians 4:16; Revelation 1:10-11)
4. To enable churches to extend conscientious commendation to one another, manifesting their real affection and honour one of another in Christ. (Acts 17:11; 2 Corinthians 8:1; 9:2)
5. To cooperate in the spreading of the gospel, especially in revitalising and planting confessional Reformed Baptist churches, supporting missionaries and training men for the ministry. (Philippians 1:3-7; 2 Corinthians 8:18)
6. To promote the good of all the churches of Christ, especially those in the association, recognising that callings, gifts & graces, belong to the churches, not the association. (Ephesians 4:1-16; Philippians 2:25-30).
7. To preserve unity of faith and practice within the confines of our Confession of Faith, especially in dealing with doctrinal and practical questions, affording counsel to the churches in such matters. (Acts 15:1-29; 1 Corinthians 14:33)
8. To supply the pulpits of sister churches, especially when one is without pastoral oversight / ministry. (Philippians 2:19-24; 2 John:7-11; Jude:3)
9. To give financial aid and assistance when necessary and when God prospers our churches. (1 Corinthians 16:1; 2 Corinthians 8:19)
10. To guard against and address sins, errors, and heresies in the churches (which we know will arise), in order to maintain purity and truth, for the increase of love & mutual edification. (1 Timothy 1:18-20; Titus 1:7-11; Jude:1-25)
11. To curb the wanton abuse of church power, seeking the good of each member in Christ, recognising that churches can be in error and may need counsel or even rebuke. (3 John:9-11, 1 Corinthians 11:17-34; 1 Peter 5:1-11)
12. To represent the churches in the civil realm, giving counsel in dealing with difficult cases where civil disobedience may be required, and calling the civil magistracy to account under the Scriptures, all the while praying for them in accordance with the will of Christ. (Romans 13:1-7; I Timothy 2:1-7; Acts 5:29-42; Mark 12:13-17)

IV. MEMBERSHIP IN THIS ASSOCIATION

The uniting of churches in this association is a voluntary act, similar to membership into a local church. Churches, therefore, may be admitted into this association through a process of application similar to that which a local church may require of its members.

1. Each member church enjoys the privilege of receiving conscientious commendation from all other member churches of the association as a true and orderly church of the Lord Jesus Christ which fully subscribes to 2LCF.
2. Each member church accepts the duty of maintaining the unity of the Spirit and peace within its own local body and among the member churches of the association. This duty requires that member churches bring unresolved matters of conflict, stress, difficulty, or differences within the local church or between member churches to the attention of the association in writing.

Therefore, the requirements for admission to this association are as follows:

1. A church must formally and fully subscribe (see Appendix 1) to 2LCF, having officially adopted this Confession as the best expression of that church's doctrinal position.
2. That church's elders and deacons must also personally and fully subscribe to 2LCF.
3. The church and its officers, agreeing with our constitution, must have officially agreed to join this association (this decision being made in whatever manner that local church's government dictates).

The procedure for receiving new churches is as follows:

1. A church that is interested in joining ought to make every effort to familiarise itself with this particular association. This may include attending stated meetings as guests, reading any history or minutes of past meetings, and asking questions of delegates from existing member churches.
2. A church desiring membership must apply with the commendation of an existing member church.
3. The recommending church must then send this application, along with copies of all pertinent documents, (church constitution, contact information, etc.) to all member churches at least two weeks before the next scheduled meeting. At that meeting, an elder (or if none, another representative) of the applying church must appear before the messengers of the member churches in order to give satisfactory evidence of the church's and its elders' faith, practice, and willingness to support the association wholeheartedly.
4. The applying church shall be received into membership by the 2/3 vote of all messengers present and voting. Should the church delegates be unable to reach a two thirds majority, the applying church may seek to address whatever concerns there may be and reapply as early as the next agreed upon meeting. The results shall be communicated to the member church congregations.

A church retains membership in the association as long as:

1. It continues to meet the requirements for admission.
2. It continues to desire membership in this association.
3. It is represented at a minimum of two of the stated meetings of the association in a 12-month period, one of which must be the annual general assembly of the churches. Failure to attend the meetings in the prescribed manner may indicate a lack of interest and support for the association, or a providential hindrance from supporting it, and may therefore constitute reason to be excluded.

The association may exclude any church:

1. Which officially (or whose elder(s) personally) deviates from 2LCF in a manner indicating that the church or its elder(s) no longer fully subscribe to it.
2. Which officially (or whose elder(s) personally) can no longer peacefully support the association or its constitution.
3. Which is not represented by qualified delegates at the requisite number of the association's stated meetings.
4. Any member church desiring to withdraw from the association may do so by submitting a letter of resignation that states its reason(s).

Note: a church will automatically be removed from the association if it fails to attend any meetings at all for a 24-month period. If providential hindrance beyond the control of the church is the reason for non-attendance, they may reapply as soon as they are able to send messengers again.

V. THE POWER AND AUTHORITY OF THIS ASSOCIATION

1. Each church is independent and under the authority and control of the Lord Jesus Christ alone. No outside entity, whether it is a government, religious group, or even another church and its officers, has any power or jurisdiction over one of Christ's churches. Each congregation is self-governing and autonomous under the headship of Jesus Christ, according to the word of God.
2. This association is not a church and therefore, is not entrusted "with any church-power properly so called, or with any jurisdiction over the churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over any churches or persons or to impose their determination on the churches or officers" (2LCF 26.15). The power and authority of this association is limited by the authority and autonomy of each of its member churches and, therefore, must be practiced in such a way that does not undermine, but actually honors and protects, the authority and autonomy of the churches.
3. The association has a right to call any delinquent member church to account for any deviation from the word of God as summarised in the 2LCF in doctrine or practice. If satisfactory reasons are not given by the delinquent church for its actions or lack of reformation thereof, the association has the authority to exclude

that church from its communion and fellowship by two thirds vote of the member churches in assembly. This action of exclusion neither dissolves nor destroys the independence of that church, but merely removes the association's conscientious commendation from that church, along with its membership in the association.

4. If the individual members of a member church have a complaint concerning their elder(s), they must first communicate the matter to their own elder(s), and if unresolved to their own church. Wherein a matter of difficulty or difference remains, the church member(s) may appeal to the association for counsel. Doctrinal issues, difficulties, or any matter within or between churches can be placed on the agenda of the association's regular meeting by the messengers of any one of its member churches.
5. If there are unresolved difficulties or differences between member churches that threaten the peace and unity of the Spirit among churches or within the association, the matter should be brought before the association. The messengers of the churches in association will convene at the next regularly scheduled meeting (or call a special meeting) to hear the complaint, and make their advice known to the other churches.
6. The messengers thus assembled are not armed with coercive power to impose their determination(s) on the churches or officers. The association can take nothing from the transgressing church but what it gave to it. However, the association has the prerogative to publish the results of its findings, as deemed necessary, for the good of the cause of Christ, and the purity of the gospel.
7. The association may develop formal agreements of cooperation with other institutions, for the purpose of working together in ways consistent with this association's "purposes", so long as such institutions fully subscribe to 2LCF.

VI. THE FUNCTIONING OF THIS ASSOCIATION

1. When conducting the business of the association, churches should be represented by qualified messengers who have been chosen by their local church and fully subscribe to 2LCF.
2. The messengers of the churches shall meet on a scheduled basis to give a report of their particular church's spiritual state, to assess their needs, and to consult together. On the basis of this, the association will determine specific objectives, hear and discuss questions, and address problems. Special meetings for association business may be called at the pleasure of the churches.
3. The messengers shall appoint a member church to carry out the business of the association for each period of 12 months; from this church, a moderator and a secretary shall be set aside. The moderator will be de facto chairman of the meetings for that year; the secretary shall keep notes of the proceedings of the meetings, sending copies to each of the churches, and supply copies of the agenda at least 10 days in advance of each meeting. A church may serve in this way for a

maximum of two years running, although each moderator may serve for only one year.

4. A quorum for the purpose of conducting the business of this association shall consist of all those seated delegates present at its scheduled meetings, but no less than two thirds of the member churches.
5. According to I.4, any church may send as many qualified messengers as it desires to an appointed association business meeting, but each church will have only one vote. In each meeting, the voting messenger must be identified before the start of the meeting. This will ensure that no matter how small or large a congregation may be, no church will ever be without a voice, and no church will ever be able to gain preeminence or control over the association. In the case of smaller churches with no full-time ministers, it is permissible for them to appoint messengers from sister churches to represent them.
6. A church shall not vote on associational matters pertaining to questions or issues regarding itself.
7. The association may authorise conferences, study days and various inter-church fellowship activities as the delegates see fit, for the good of the churches. However, none of these can replace the assemblies / meetings for conduct of business of the association, which must always be given priority.
8. The messengers may, as needed, appoint *ad hoc* committees for carrying out the business of the association. All committees shall be limited to administration and shall communicate their work or findings to the churches of the association in their fullness for deliberation and decision-making. In this way, the association will seek to protect itself from delegating the power of the churches (where Christ is enthroned) to committees (where he is not).
9. The association may determine to pool together financial resources for particular objectives. In this case, a member church shall be appointed to collect and channel those funds. Accounts for each fund must be presented at each AGM. If a church collecting and channeling funds leaves the association for any reason, they are obliged to pass those funds to another member church as agreed.
10. In the event of dissolution, no member church or private individual shall be entitled to any of these funds. Funds shall be used first to pay outstanding debts; any remaining assets shall be equally divided among the member churches.
11. Any article in this constitution may be amended by a two-thirds vote of the messengers present and voting at an officially called business meeting, provided the proposed amendment has been distributed in writing to every member church at least sixty days before the vote is taken. Amendments shall be incorporated into this Constitution after they have been approved.
12. Article II may never be amended or altered by this association.

May God the Father who chose the church, and God the Son who made atonement for the church, and God the Holy Spirit who applies the redemptive work of Christ to the church, bless and enlarge our churches in Christ Jesus' name. Amen.

APPENDIX 1

What Is “Full Subscription?”

Submitted by Dr. James M. Renihan

Confessional subscription employs three main terms in its nomenclature: absolute, strict/full, and loose. This association has adopted the middle position. According to Dr. Morton H. Smith, “strict or full subscription takes at face value” the terminology used in adopting a confession of faith.

In an article entitled “The Case for Full Subscription” (in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, ed. by David Hall, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995; pages 185-6), Dr. Smith provides some helpful insights [albeit in a Presbyterian context with a much more developed tradition of discussion of the issue than among Baptists]. He says, “Note some things that full subscription does not mean. First, it does not insist that all of the teachings of the Confession . . . are of equal importance (just as not all of the teachings in the Bible are of equal importance). The full subscriptionist recognises that some doctrines are more foundational than others, in accord with the biblical example. Positively, the full subscriptionist believes that in professing that the Confession . . . [is] his confession, he is subscribing to all of the doctrines in the Confession . . . they are all part of the system of doctrine . . . Second, full subscription does not require the adoption of every word of the Confession . . . but positively believes that we are adopting every doctrine or teaching of the Confession”

One should note the language found in the agreement signed by the messengers of the founding churches in Mesa, Arizona in March, 1997; in the ARBCA constitution; and in the application for membership. The first states, “We declare that our primary rule of faith and practice is the inerrant Word of God, and adopt as our subordinate standards the excellent document commonly known as the London Baptist Confession of 1689, and the Constitution of this Association.” The second states, “While we hold tenaciously to the inerrant and infallible Word of God as found in the sixty-six books of the Bible (this being our final source of faith and practice), we embrace and adopt the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 as a faithful expression of the doctrine taught in the Scriptures. This Confession is the doctrinal standard of the Association,” and in the third the applying church signs this statement: “We accept the London Confession of Faith of 1689 as an accurate and reliable expression of what the Scriptures teach and the faith we confess.” In each case, the member churches commit themselves to the Confession as a whole. We maintain the primacy of the Scriptures, and “embrace and adopt” the Confession as a truthful expression of our convictions with regard to the details of Scripture.

Taken at face value, these words imply, even though they do not explicitly state, strict, or full subscription. This does not mean that we treat every doctrine in the Confession as if it were equally important, but we do commit ourselves to all of the doctrines of the

Confession. In addition, as Dr. Smith says so well, “full subscription does not require the adoption of every word of the Confession or Catechisms, but positively believes that we are adopting every doctrine or teaching of the Confession or Catechisms.” This is an important distinction and needs to be understood. It is possible for an individual, a church, or an association to be cautious about the wording used to express a specific doctrine without denying the doctrine that wording seeks to define. Full subscription honestly adopts all of the doctrines expressed in the confessional formulation. In the case of [this association], it means that by subscribing to the document commonly known as the London Baptist Confession of 1689, we receive all of the doctrines contained in it as true, founded on the Word of God.

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