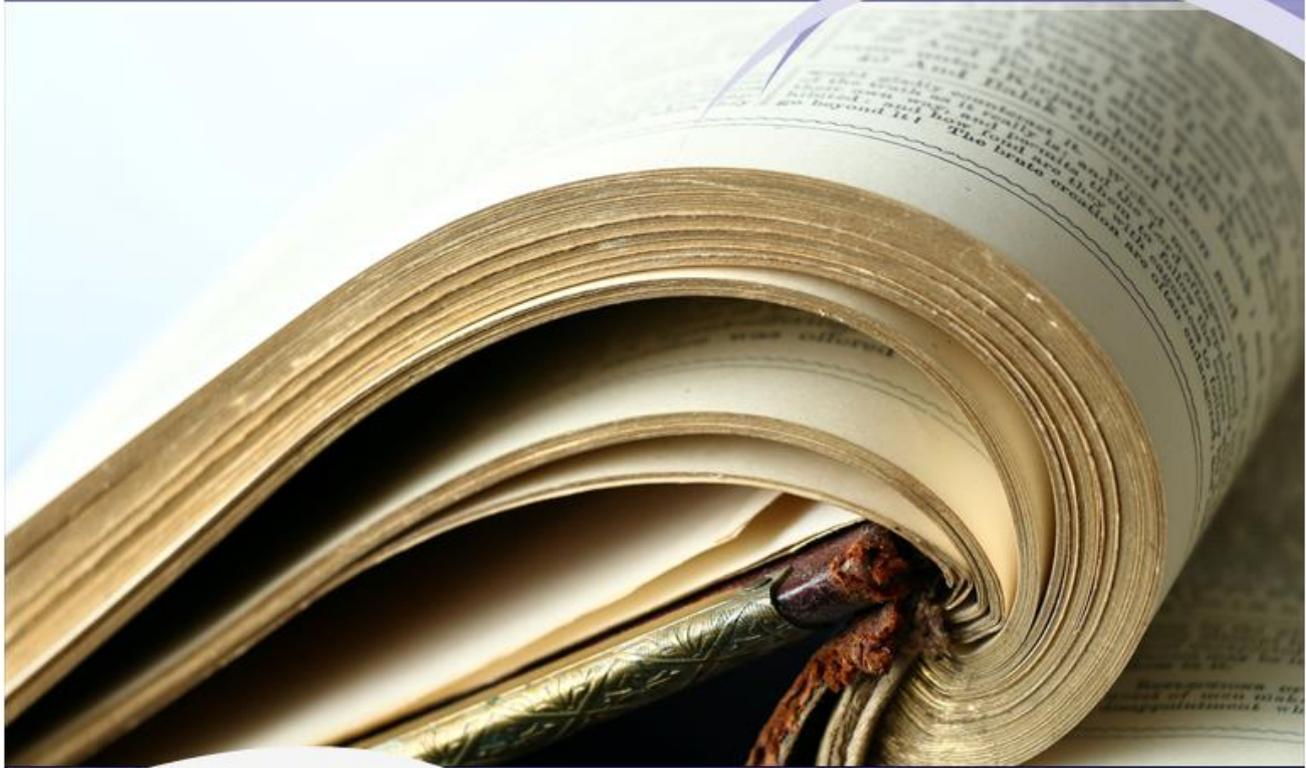


# Being Presbyterian Papers



## A Credible Profession of faith?

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## **A CREDIBLE PROFESSION OF FAITH?**

In 2018 the Doctrine Committee presented a report to the General Assembly which raised *“the specific theological question of what constitutes a credible profession of faith and how it is to be understood and applied in these particular pastoral situations.”* (General Assembly Reports, 2018, p.84, par.2). The situations referred to had previously been set out as *“the issue of same-sex couples who may seek communicant membership (either by presentation of a disjunction certificate or on profession of faith) or who may request the baptism of a child”.* (General Assembly Reports, 2018, p.84, par.1). The report itself recognises *“the danger of giving the impression that there is only one area where sacramental discipline might apply. However, the current request to the Doctrine Committee asks for guidance in one particular area.”* (General Assembly Reports, 2018, p.88, par.16). It is to be welcomed that the Doctrine Committee did widen the area of debate in a resolution asking that *“appropriate training be offered to Kirk Sessions on the theology and practice of the Church’s understanding of ‘a credible profession of faith’”* (General Assembly Reports, 2018, p.144, res.20), although the focus was immediately narrowed again with the addition in the same resolution of a request for appropriate training on *“the pastoral guidelines on homosexuality.”* This short paper is a reflection on the first part of the resolution, namely the Church’s understanding of a credible profession of faith.

Much subsequent discussion seems to have assumed that The Code, or more fully, The book of the Constitution and Government of The Presbyterian Church in Ireland, uses the term “credible profession of faith” when discussing who shall be baptised, or admitted to the Lord’s Supper. In fact the phrase “credible profession of faith” is only used once in The Code, at Par 83, where it instructs a minister to encourage baptism *“of the children of all such as may make a credible profession of faith”*. The scenario there is that the parents have not yet indicated that they wish baptism for their child, or that they are ready to make a profession of faith, but the minister sees sufficient evidence in the lifestyle and church contact of at least one of them to judge that they might credibly make such a profession, and so that possibility should be explored. It is to take up an evangelical opportunity to explore the gospel with those who have some contact with the church.

When The Code, however, is dealing with the situation of a parent or parents approaching the minister or Kirk Session to ask for the baptism of a child the word “credible” is not used. *“Baptism shall be administered to those who make a profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and to the infant children of one or both believing parents”* (Code Par 39). It is true that within the service of baptism a

parent is asked to promise to provide a Christian home and to bring the child up in the worship and teaching of the church. If the Kirk Session is convinced that the parent is not seriously going to fulfil their promises baptism may be refused, but that is not a judgement on the validity of the profession of faith, rather on how effectively the parents intend to put what they have promised into practice.

The distinction is set out more explicitly in the section of The Code on *“Admission to the Lord’s Supper”*. Three things are required. *“The Kirk Session shall admit to the Lord’s Supper only those who have been baptised, who make a profession of faith in the Lord Jesus, and whose character is consistent with such a profession”* (Code Par 40). The problem arises when *“profession of faith”* and *“character”* become conflated – the 2018 report describes *“credible profession”* as *“effectively a shorthand for not only a credible profession of Christ as Saviour but also a credible walk in obedience to him as Lord”* (General Assembly Reports, 2018, p.85, par5), but they should not be confused in that way. A person’s profession of faith is made to God, expressing faith in Jesus Christ, exercised by the power of the Holy Spirit. Only God, in the person of the risen and ascended Christ, can be the judge of a genuine profession. The Church can express a view on the outworking of faith in the character and lifestyle of the person concerned, but should always do so with great care, recognising that its task is to encourage an uncertain faith, not to destroy it.

The distinction may not seem to some all that significant, yet it is important to a proper understanding of the sacraments as gifts of God’s grace; not something anyone deserves but offered by the Spirit through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The Westminster Confession puts it this way: *“Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and his benefits, and to confirm our interest in him”* (Westminster Confession, Chap 27(1)). In offering either of the sacraments the Church must always recognise that the initiative comes from God and the individual responds to Him. The Church is a conduit for God’s grace and love reaching out to people.

In dealing with the efficacy of baptism the Confession states: *“The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God’s own will, in his appointed time.”* (Westminster Confession, Chap 28(6)). In the sacraments it is God who receives a person’s profession of faith and who

understands what is going on in that person's heart and mind. The grace that is offered becomes effective in God's appointed time.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke gives two brief accounts of baptisms in the early Church. *Acts 8: 26-40* describes Philip's encounter with an Ethiopian eunuch. While it is reckless to read too much into what is not recorded, the impression given is that Philip did not know this man before, or anything about his lifestyle, yet when the Ethiopian asked "*What is to prevent me from being baptised?*" (*Acts 8:36, New Revised Standard Version*), the chariot was stopped and the man was baptised. Some manuscripts include Philip's reply as verse 37, "*If you believe with all your heart, you may*", followed by the Ethiopian's profession, "*I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God*". Philip did not question him further.

On another occasion in *Acts 16:22-34*, Luke tells of the experience of Paul and Silas in a Philippian prison. It resulted in the baptism not only of the jailer but of his family, some translations indeed widen the circle to include the jailer's whole household. While in prison Paul and Silas may well have built up a relationship with the jailer, but it seems unlikely they knew very much about the other people in the house, yet all were baptised. It was recognised that a work of grace had begun, even though it was not of course complete, any more than it is in any one of us. Paul, writing to the Philippians, goes out of his way to correct any misunderstanding about his own walk with Christ, when he writes, "*Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.*" (*Philippians 3:12, New International Version*).

In 1992 an Overture from the Iveagh Presbytery was brought to the General Assembly asking that the wording of Code Par 39(1) be changed to the following:

*"Baptism shall be administered to those who make a **credible** profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, **being manifest in love, loyalty and obedience to God, interest in the life and work of the Church, including faithful attendance at public worship**, and to their infant children. It shall be administered in all cases by a minister and, as far as possible, it shall be administered publicly."* (*General Assembly Reports, 1992, p.39; proposed changes to The Code in bold*).

The Overture was sent to Presbyteries under the Barrier Act and it was reported in 1993 that the Overture had been rejected, with 17 Presbyteries voting against and 4 for. (*General Assembly Reports, 1993, p.68, par.35*).

In light of the present debate it is interesting that in their discussions the Presbyteries were guided by reports from both the Doctrine Committee and the Judicial Commission. The Doctrine Committee commented:

*“Baptism is, in our understanding of it, a sacrament of the covenant of grace, and operates by grace through faith. Obedience and all other forms of true Christian living are consequences of this. As the Church of Scotland Manual states, ‘We must remember that Baptism is not the sacrament of what we do, but a sacrament of what God has already done in Christ, and therefore of what he offers us in the gospel, although it requires a response from us’. (Wotherspoon and Kirkpatrick: A Manual of Church Doctrine, ed. T.F. Torrance and R. Selby Wright, p.23).*

*With this understanding the present form of Par. 39 (1) of the Code is adequate, since it presupposes grace which is received in faith. The addition of a new section on the consequences or requirements of faith is a dubious procedure and to be avoided for three reasons:*

- (a) It queries the ‘sola fide’ (by faith alone) principle of Scripture and the Reformers;*
- (b) It introduces an element of works religion into what is essentially by grace alone;*
- (c) It contravenes the dictum that ‘the requirements of grace should not be made the conditions of grace’. Grace is the free, unmerited, unconditional mercy of God to us sinners.*

*The overture seems to us to be contrary to our Subordinate Standards, which do not have the word ‘credible’. It goes a considerable way to making the requirements of grace conditions of it. We note that Par. 83(1) includes the word ‘credible’ which Par. 39(1) does not. Par 39(1) is a perfectly adequate doctrinal statement as it stands.” (General Assembly Reports, 1993, p.66, pars.24-26).*

*The Judicial Commission broadly concurred and added the suggestion that “in case of doubt or difficulty, it is better to speak of the “incredibility” of certain professions of faith than of establishing the credibility of all the others.” (General Assembly Reports, 1993, p.67, par.31).*

So the Church in the past has recognised that it is not in a position to judge the credibility of someone’s faith, although it may and should ask questions about lifestyle, to encourage the person to grow in their understanding of the commitment to Christ they have expressed. As Paul recognised with the Philippians, all believers are involved in a process of what is traditionally called sanctification. The Kirk Session has an important and at times difficult role to play in that, but it is one of encouragement. None of us who profess faith are immediately the finished article, nor will we be until we join in the great banquet of which the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is a foretaste. Then we may be surprised at who we meet.

The book of Genesis records how Joseph's brothers were afraid, on the death of their father Jacob, in case that would be the moment when Joseph would turn against them. They sent him a message claiming that before his death their father had told them to ask Joseph to forgive them. Joseph's reply was simple, but profound: *"Don't be afraid; I can't put myself in the place of God."* (Genesis 50: 19, *Good News Bible*).

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