



Baptists: Confessors of Faith

Issue 3

Fall/Winter 1990-91

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The Founders Journal

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A facsimile of the title page taken from the confession of faith which the Philadelphia Baptist Association adopted and ordered printed in 1742.

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The Founders Journal is a quarterly publication which takes as its theological framework the first recognized confession of faith that Southern Baptists produced, [*The Abstract of Principles*](#).

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Baptists: Confessors of Faith

Tom Ascol

The title of Jimmy Draper's presidential address to the 1983 Southern Baptist Convention in Pittsburgh was, "Southern Baptists: People of Deep Belief." In this message Dr. Draper spoke of "cherished biblical truths" which have "characterized Southern Baptists." He argued that, *even for Southern Baptists*, certain biblical doctrines are non-negotiable. Because of this, he called for minimal doctrinal parameters which encompass "the irreducible minimum theology that a person must subscribe to in order to be acceptable as a professor" or employee of any convention agency.

This recommendation, though met with charges of "creedalism" and judged by some to be unbaptistic, finds clear precedent in James P. Boyce's address on theological education before the trustees of Furman University in 1856 (see the articles by Timothy George and Tom Nettles). Boyce saw his concerns given expression in the *Abstract of Principles* which, since its adoption in 1858, professors of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary have been required to sign.

Much has changed since then. Southern Baptists have largely forgotten their theological roots. More alarming than this, however, is the widespread indifference toward and outright disapprobation of doctrine itself. "Leave theology to the theologians" is a sentiment which has been expressed in a variety of ways in many different forums.

Such doctrinal malaise inevitably spawns antipathy toward confessions of faith. Why seek to give expression to that which is, at best, unimportant or irrelevant? Will not such efforts sterilize our faith and drain it of life? Has not God made me free to read the Bible for myself and follow the dictates of my own conscience?

These and similar arguments have been employed to resist the formulation and use of creeds and confessions. Such reasoning is not, however, convincing.

The Bible declares that doctrine is important. It is to be watched closely: "Take heed . . . unto the doctrine" (1 Tim. 4:16). There is indeed a body of truth which constitutes "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). A proper Christology--doctrine of Christ--is prerequisite to fellowship: "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine [of Christ], do not receive him into your house nor greet him" (2 John 10).

The New Testament Church had a confession even before its inauguration at Pentecost. Peter formulated it: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matt. 16:16).

Far from stifling true faith, a creed is faith's inevitable expression. "We believe and therefore we speak" (2 Cor. 4:14) Living faith must be confessed. The word "creed" itself comes from the Latin word *credo*, meaning, "I believe." Because every Christian believes something, every Christian has a creed--whether it is clearly articulated or not.

Creeds and confessions do not undermine the Bible. Rather they derive their existence from the Bible. Like every other good and helpful tool, they too are subject to misuse and abuse. Yet, in their rightful place--in submission to the Scripture's authority--they can be (and indeed have been) very beneficial to God's people.

Baptists have been a confessional people. Historically, we have stood for certain discernible principles. Reclaiming

our confessional heritage is an important step toward theological renewal and ecclesiastical revitalization.

When the eminent Baptist pastor, C. H. Spurgeon, republished the Second (1689) London Baptist Confession in 1855, he affixed these personal words of admonition to the preface:

This [confession] is not issued as an authoritative rule, or code of faith, whereby you are to be fettered, but as an assistance to you in controversy, a confirmation in faith, and a means of edification in righteousness. Here the younger members of our church will have a Body of Divinity in small compass, and by means of the Scriptural proofs, will be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in them.

Be not ashamed of your faith; remember it is the ancient gospel of martyrs, confessors, reformers, and saints. Above all, it is the truth of God, against which the gates of Hell cannot prevail.

Let your lives adorn your faith, let your example adorn your creed. Above all live in Christ Jesus, and walk in Him, giving credence to no teaching but that which is manifestly approved of Him, and owned by the Holy Spirit. Cleave fast to the Word of God which is here mapped out for you.

May this pattern of vital Christian living be increasingly realized in our own generation.



The Priesthood of All Believers and the Quest for Theological Integrity

Timothy George

This article first appeared in the Criswell Theological Journal (Sp. 1989) and is reprinted by permission

It is ironic that the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers has displaced biblical inerrancy as the hottest item of dispute in the recent SBC controversy.^[1] Perhaps this is related to the fact that the term inerrancy has lost some of its polemical punch as it has become more widely acceptable. Inerrancy, of course, is not a term of recent vintage within the denomination. In a book entitled, *Baptist, Why and Why Not*, published by the Sunday School Board in 1900, J. M. Frost, then the Corresponding Secretary of the Board, wrote: "We accept the Scriptures as an all-sufficient and infallible rule of faith and practice, and insist upon the absolute inerrancy and sole authority of the Word of God."^[2] Many, however, are still reluctant to use the term because of its political connotations, or because of its presumed incompatibility with serious biblical scholarship.

The irony of the ongoing dispute is that no one denies the priesthood of believers! What is at stake is how this principle is to be understood, and how it is related to other, equally valid, doctrinal concerns. The squabble over pastoral authority, an important but separable issue, has obscured what is--or ought to be--the central focus of the debate, namely the quest for a proper balance between individual responsibility and theological integrity. The strategy of the present essay is first to examine the relation between the priesthood of believers and the historic Baptist tenets of soul competency and religious liberty, then to probe the tension between confessional identity and hermeneutical autonomy, the so-called "right of private interpretation," and, finally, to recall the original Reformation meaning of the priesthood of all believers in light of subsequent developments and present applications.

I. Soul Competency and Religious Liberty

Soul competency and religious liberty are important, historic Baptist principles, but they should not be equated with the priesthood of all believers. Soul competency, as stated by E. Y. Mullins, is based on the premise that all persons have an inalienable right of direct access to God. Put otherwise, all persons created in the image of God stand in a unique and inviolable relation to their Creator and, when quickened by divine grace, are fully "competent" or capable of responding to God directly.^[3]

W. T. Conner spoke of "man's capacity for God," and earlier theologians related this dimension of the human self to one's ability to reason, make moral judgments, contemplate immortality and be awed by the grandeur and mystery of the universe.^[4] Soul competency, in other words, is part of what it means for a human being to be created in the image of God.

In Book One of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin gives a classic interpretation of the innate knowledge of God which has been implanted in all persons. He refers to it variously as "an awareness of divinity," "the seed of religion" (*semen religionis*), and "the worm of conscience."^[5] This natural capacity of the soul for God is the basis for the incurably religious bent of all human beings. Given the devastating effects of the Fall, however, human religiousness can only issue in idolatry and self-centeredness apart from the interposition of God's grace. From the standpoint of soteriology, then, we should speak more accurately of "soul incompetence." However, as Paul declared in Romans 1 and 2, the awareness of God in every conscience is sufficiently clear to render every human being utterly inexcusable before the bar of divine judgment.

Soul competency means thus that *every* individual is responsible to God. This principle undergirds our evangelistic appeals

for repentance and faith. There are no sponsors or proxies in the relation of the individual to God. As B. H. Carroll put it, "This is the first principle of New Testament law--to bring each naked soul face to face with God . . . O soul, thou art alone before God!"[\[6\]](#)

Soul competency pertains universally to all persons, not merely to Christians. Baptists, however, do not teach the 'priesthood of all human beings.' Priesthood applies only to those who, through repentance and faith, have been admitted into the covenant of grace and, consequently, have been made participants in the priestly ministry of their Mediator, Jesus Christ, i.e., to believers only. As we shall see, priesthood of believers is really a part of the doctrine of the church. It cannot be stretched into an anthropological generalization without doing great violence to its biblical and historic Reformation meaning.

Baptists have a splendid history as champions of religious liberty and the separation of church and state. Since God alone is Lord of the conscience, the temporal realm has no authority to coerce religious commitments. Seventeenth-century English Baptists were among the first advocates of absolute religious toleration. In his famous treatise, *The Mystery of Iniquity*, Thomas Helwys addressed King James in 1612: "Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them."[\[7\]](#)

The Baptist commitment to religious liberty, however, has never been a pretext for doctrinal indifference or moral laxity. In 1689 the London Baptists published a *Second Confession* to show their hearty agreement with "that wholesome protestant doctrine . . . in all the fundamental articles of the Christian religion."[\[8\]](#) When, shortly thereafter, some Baptist abandoned their belief in the deity of Christ and became Unitarians, there was a major split in Baptist ranks. Even earlier, the *Standard Confession* of the General Baptists, published in 1660, had juxtaposed a clear call for liberty of conscience with the right of each congregation to maintain its doctrinal integrity. Thus Article 24 asserts "that it is the will and mind of God (in these Gospel times) that all men should have the free liberty of their own consciences in matters of Religion, or Worship, without the least oppression, or persecution." This follows the admonition of Article 17 that the true church should "reject all Hereticks" along with any others who teach "contrary to the Doctrine (of Christ) which they have learned."[\[9\]](#)

In America the Baptist plea for freedom of religion was furthered by Roger Williams who lambasted the "soul-murdering" magistrates of Massachusetts for their efforts to coerce religious persecution. Yet there was hardly a more stubborn religious controversialist in all of New England than Roger Williams. He broke fellowship with Separatists of Plymouth because their Separatism was less strict than his, he refused to join the church in Boston because it would not publicly repent of ever having had fellowship with the (false!) Church of England, he excoriated the Quakers because of their doctrine of the "inner light" which, to his mind, undermined the necessity of grace. E. Morgan has said of Williams, "Most of his writings were demonstrations that other people were wrong."[\[10\]](#) The great apostle of religious liberty would be shocked to know that in some circles he is touted today as the progenitor of modern theological liberalism!

Religious liberty guarantees the ability of every congregation to order its own internal life, its doctrine and discipline, in accordance with its own perception of divine truth. It requires that there be no external political monitoring of the internal religious life of voluntary associations. Practically, this means that heresy is always possible and that spiritual vigilance is a constant necessity. Thus, priesthood of believers does not mean, "I am a priest. I can believe anything I want to." It means rather, "As a priest in a covenanted community of believers, I must be alert to keep my congregation from departing from 'the faith once and for all delivered unto the saints' " (Jude 3).

II. Individual Responsibility and Theological Integrity

One of the greatest advances in Christian history was the translation and dissemination of Holy Scripture in the language of the common people. The legacy of an open Bible means that every believer has both the right and the responsibility to search the Scriptures diligently and follow their counsel obediently.

While studying his NT, the young Congregational missionary, Adoniram Judson, became convinced that infant baptism was unscriptural. Forthwith he became a Baptist! We applaud Judson's discovery, but the "right of private interpretation" can also lead in the opposite direction. In the 19th century, not a few Baptists became convinced, through their sincere study of the Bible, of the eventual salvation of all persons. Many of them became in fact Universalists. More recently, a Baptist leader in another country openly questioned the reality of the Incarnation, comparing belief in the deity of Christ to a child's belief in the tooth fairy.^[11] In neither of these examples did anyone deny outright the authority of the Bible. In both cases, however, the conclusions arrived at could not be squared with, to quote the preamble to the *Baptist Faith and Message*, "certain definite doctrines that Baptists believe, cherish, and with which they have been and are now closely identified."^[12]

The issue is *not* the right of every individual believer to worship God and interpret Scripture according to the dictates of his own conscience. No one has spoken more eloquently to this principle than George W. Truett in his 1939 address to the Baptist World Alliance: "For any person or institution to dare to come between the soul and God is a blasphemous impertinence."^[13] No *true* Baptist has ever denied that. What is at stake is the right of a community of believer-priests, whether local congregation, association, state or national convention, to define for itself, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, the acceptable doctrinal perimeters of its own fellowship.

Baptists have never been *creedalistic* in the sense of placing man-made doctrinal constructs above Holy Scripture. To my knowledge, no Baptist body has ever put forth a confession of faith which claimed to be infallible or beyond revision. The preamble to the *Baptist Faith and Message* states explicitly: "As in the past so in the future Baptists should hold themselves free to revise their statements of faith as may seem to them wise and expedient at any time."^[14] If we take seriously the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*, we must see our confessional standards as derivative documents. We must be ready always to measure them by Holy Writ as by a touchstone.

Historically, Baptists have often recoiled from the very word "creed" because of its association with the ecclesiastico-political repression of religious dissent. Doubtless this is what W. B. Johnson, the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, had in mind when he referred in 1845 to "a Baptist aversion to all creeds but the Bible."^[15] In fact, it was unnecessary for the nascent Convention to adopt a specific theological standard because of the overwhelming doctrinal consensus which prevailed among the messengers, most of whom belonged to congregations which adhered to the *Philadelphia Confession of Faith*, an American adaptation of the 1689 *Second London Confession*.

A few years later, however, James Petigru Boyce, in setting forth the rationale for Southern Baptists' first theological seminary, insisted that each professor subscribe to a set of doctrinal principles. Moreover, Boyce insisted, "His agreement with the standard should be exact. His declaration of it should be based upon no mental reservation, upon no private understanding with those who immediately invest him into office."^[16] Boyce was well aware that there were those who felt that such a policy of strict subscription was a violation of academic freedom and liberty of conscience, but he urged its adoption nonetheless:

You will infringe the rights of no man, and you will secure the rights of those who have established here an instrumentality for the production of a sound ministry. It is no hardship to those who teach here, to be called upon to sign the declaration of their principles, for there are fields of usefulness open elsewhere to every man, and none need accept your call who cannot conscientiously sign your formulary.^[17]

Boyce related the reluctance of some Baptists to adopt a specific doctrinal standard to the influence of Alexander Campbell whose slogan of "no creed but the Bible" had lured many Baptists away from their traditional confessional moorings.^[18] Campbell had decried the use of confessions as an infringement upon the rights of conscience. Boyce, however, in a brilliant rebuttal, traced the history of confessional statements from NT times down to his own day. He showed that Baptists in particular had been prolific in promulgating confessions, both as public declarations of their own faith and as a means of testing the true faith in others. He later recalled, "It was with great difficulty, at first, that some of the members of the Convention were led to vote for what they called a Creed. But it was manifest that some such provision

ought to exist."[\[19\]](#)

At strategic points in their history, Baptists have not hesitated to identify themselves with the great truths of historic evangelical theology, and to do so explicitly. In the first decades of the 20th century, radical biblical criticism had led to an undermining of the basic truths of the gospel itself. Aware of this encroachment in many of the mainline denominations, E.Y. Mullins, who can hardly be labeled a "fundamentalist," declared before the Southern Baptist Convention in 1923:

We record again our unwavering adherence to the supernatural elements in the Christian religion. The Bible is God's revelation of himself through man moved by the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit. He was the divine and eternal Son of God. He wrought miracles, healing the sick, casting out demons, raising the dead. He died as the vicarious atoning Savior of the world and was buried. The tomb was emptied of its contents. In his risen body he appeared many times to his disciples. He ascended to the right hand of the Father. He will come again in person, the same Jesus who ascended from the Mount of Olives. We believe that adherence to the above truths and facts is a necessary condition of service for teachers in our Baptist schools.[\[20\]](#)

Mullins' call for conscientious adherence to the "supernatural elements" of the Christian kerygma does not violate the priesthood of believers, any more than the NT's designation of the denial of the Incarnation as anti-Christian (1 John 4:3) nullifies soul competency. Every Christian remains free to interpret the Bible as he believes he is led by the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of religious liberty declares that penal measures must not be used by the civil authorities to enforce belief. But it also implies that the church must be free to define and maintain the boundaries of its own fellowship. A church which is unable to do this or, even worse, no longer thinks it is worth doing, is a church which has lost its soul.

Where and how do we draw the boundaries? Undoubtedly, this is one of the most delicate tasks the church faces. We can err either by drawing the boundaries too tightly, or by refusing to draw them at all. On the one hand, we lapse into legalism, on the other, into relativism. For example, most Southern Baptists would not be willing to make agreement on the details of a particular hermeneutic of eschatology, say, pretribulational premillennialism, a binding test of fellowship. But can--or should--we accept as tolerable the demythologization of the *Parousia* which reduces the return of Christ to a non-event? Must we allow under the umbrella of acceptable diversity a "process" view of God which denies His very omnipotence, or a radical historicist reading of the Bible which minimizes the miraculous, or a liberationist interpretation of salvation history which levels the Lordship of Jesus Christ? It is the role of a proper and faithful theology, that is to say, a biblical and evangelical theology, to help the church answer these questions. The proclamation of the whole counsel of God involves identifying, and saying "no" to those forms of teaching which if carried out consistently would threaten the truth of divine revelation itself. K. Barth was surely right when he said: "If we do not have the confidence of *damnamus*, we ought to omit *credimus*, and go back to doing theology as usual."[\[21\]](#) While pastors and teachers have a special responsibility to guard with care that which has been committed to their trust (1 Tim. 6:20), in the final analysis this is the task of the entire community of faith and not merely one segment of it. Indeed, this is one of the salient features of the Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

III. The Priesthood of Believers--The Reformation Model

The priesthood of all believers was a cardinal principle of the Reformation of the 16th century. It was used by the reformers to buttress an evangelical understanding of the church over against the clericalism and sacerdotalism of medieval Catholicism. In modern theology, however, the ecclesial context of this Reformation principle has been almost totally eclipsed. For example, in the current SBC debate on the issue, both sides have referred (uncritically) to the "priesthood of the believer." The reformers talked instead of the "priesthood of all believers" (plural). For them it was never a question of a lonely, isolated seeker of truth, but rather of a band of faithful believers united in a common confession as a local, visible *congregatio sanctorum*.

The modern reinterpretation of the Reformation goes back to the philosopher Hegel who saw Luther as the great champion

of human freedom whose stand against medieval obscurantism signaled the dawn of modern civilization. With F. Schleiermacher and "the turn to the subject" in theology, Luther became more and more the hero of modern rugged individualism. Consequently, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers degenerated into the ideology of "every tub sitting on its own bottom."

In this context the concepts of priesthood of believers and soul competency were conflated, the one becoming virtually interchangeable with the other. W. S. Hudson, one of the most perceptive interpreters of Baptist history, has pointed to the devastating impact of this development on Baptist ecclesiology:

To the extent that Baptists were to develop an apologetic for their church life during the early decades of the twentieth century, it was to be on the basis of this highly individualistic principle. It has become increasingly apparent that this principle was derived from the general cultural and religious climate of the nineteenth century rather than from any serious study of the Bible . . . The practical effect of the stress upon "soul competency" as the cardinal doctrine of Baptists was to make every man's hat his own church.[\[22\]](#)

The appeal to individual experience and private judgment--traditionally both suspect categories in Christian theology!--corresponded to the shift away from biblical authority and the dogmatic consensus of historic Christianity. It also produced a truncated and perverted version of what Luther and the other reformers intended when they formulated the doctrine of the spiritual priesthood of all believers.

P. Althaus, the great interpreter of Luther's theology, explains the original Reformation meaning of this term:

Luther never understands the priesthood of all believers merely in the sense of the Christian's freedom to stand in a direct relationship to God without a human mediator. Rather he constantly emphasizes the Christian's evangelical authority to come before God on behalf of the brethren and also of the world. The universal priesthood expresses not religious individualism but its exact opposite, the reality of the congregation as a community.[\[23\]](#)

Of course, Luther *did* believe that all Christians had direct access to God without recourse to "the tin gods and buffoons of this world, the pope with his priests."[\[24\]](#) But for Luther the Priesthood of all believers did *not* mean, "I am my own Priest." It meant rather: in the community of saints, God has so tempered the body that we are all priests to each other.[\[25\]](#) We stand before God and intercede for one another, we proclaim God's Word to one another and celebrate His presence among us in worship, praise and fellowship. Moreover, our priestly ministry does not terminate upon ourselves. It propels us into the world in service and witness. It constrains us to "show forth the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light" (I Pet. 2:9).

Priesthood of believers, then, has more to do with the Christian's service than with his or her status. One function Luther specifies as incumbent upon all believer-priests is that of "a guardian or watchman on the tower" (*wartman odder welcher auff der Wart*).

This is exactly what one calls someone who lives in a tower to watch and to look out over the town so that fire or foe do not harm it. Therefore, every minister . . . should be . . . an overseer or watchman, so that in his town and among his people the gospel and faith in Christ are built up and win out over foe, devil, and heresy.[\[26\]](#)

According to Luther, then, the priesthood of all believers, far from providing a cover for individual doctrinal error, is a stimulus for defending the church against those forces which would weaken and destroy it.

John Calvin interpreted the priesthood of all believers in terms of the church's threefold participation in Christ's prophetic, kingly and priestly ministry. Specifically, every Christian is mandated to be a representative of Christ in his redemptive outreach to the world.

All believers . . . should seek to bring others [into the church], should strive to lead the wanderers back to the road, should stretch forth a hand to the fallen and should win over the outsiders.[\[27\]](#)

The priesthood of believers is not a prerogative on which we can rest; it is a commission which sends us forth into the world to exercise a priestly ministry not for ourselves, but for others--"the outsiders," not instead of Christ, but for the sake of Christ and at His behest.

For Calvin, the priesthood of all believers was not only a spiritual privilege, it was also a moral obligation and a personal vocation. C. Eastwood, the great Methodist scholar whose book on the priesthood of believers is one of the few comprehensive treatments of the theme, laments the distortion of this tremendous evangelical imperative:

The common error that the phrase "Priesthood of Believers" is synonymous with "private judgment" is most unfortunate and is certainly a misrepresentation Of course, the Reformers emphasized "private judgment," but it was always "informed" judgment, and it was always controlled, checked, and corroborated by the corporate testimony of the congregation. Indeed Calvin himself fully realized that uncontrolled private judgment means subjectivism, eccentricity, anarchy, and chaos.[\[28\]](#)

Given our commitment to religious liberty, Baptists cannot approve Calvin's method of dealing with the excesses of uncontrolled private judgment, as evidenced by his acquiescence in the execution of Michael Servetus who had repudiated the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. At the same time, we can and should recognize the danger which such teaching poses to the life of the church. We should not invite Servetus to become the pastor of our church or a professor in our seminary! To do so would violate the integrity of our Christian faith. It would also be an abdication of our responsibility in the priesthood of all believers.

No one should deny the importance of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. It is a precious and irreducible part of our Reformation heritage and our Baptist legacy. But let no one trivialize its meaning by equating it with modern individualism or theological minimalism. It is a call to ministry and service; it is a barometer of the quality of our life together in the Body of Christ and of the coherence of our witness in the world for which Christ died.



Doctrines Shape Our Destiny

"Baptist Doctrines are more important that most of us realize They are to the church essentially, what the backbone is to the human body. They give unity and stability; they provide sturdiness enabling us to endure the bumps or opposition, even persecution"

The church which neglects to teach doctrine weakens its membership, works against its unity, invites instability in its fellowship, lessens conviction among its members and stalemates its future progress. It is impossible for us to exaggerate the importance of doctrine. This truth needs to be stressed constantly"

-James L. Sullivan, former Sunday School Board & SBC President



¹The 1988 SBC resolution on "Priesthood of the Believer" has provoked a firestorm of controversy. Among the many discussions in Baptist state papers, see V. Davis, "Southern Baptists and 'Priesthood,'" *Florida Baptist Witness*, July 14, 1988, and T. George, "Priesthood of the Believers—Refocusing the Debate," *Florida Baptist Witness*, October 1988. See also W. B. Shurden, *Priesthood of Believers* (Nashville: Convention, 1987).

²J. M. Frost, "Introduction," *Baptist Why and Why Not* (Nashville: Sunday School Board, 1900) 12.

³Mullins referred to soul competency as the "religious axiom," and regarded it as the basis for the Baptist rejection of infant baptism. E. Y. Mullins et al., *The Faith and Its Furtherance* (Nashville: Broadman, 1936) 51-64.

⁴W. T. Conner, *Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Broadman, 1937) 17. Cf. the following statement by J. P. Boyce: "the recognition and contemplation of such a [self-existent spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable] . . . awaken reverence and fear . . . and lead men everywhere, when in danger or distress, to call upon God . . .," *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1899) 30. See also A. Hovey, *Manual of Christian Theology* (New York: Silver, Burdett, and Co., 1900) 33-40.

⁵Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (eds. J. T. McNeill and F. L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 43-51 [I. 34].

⁶B. H. Carroll, *Baptist and Their Doctrines* (New York: Fleming Revell, 1913) 15.

⁷Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (London 1612) 46. For a fuller treatment of Helwys in the context of the early Baptist literature of toleration, see T. George, "Between Pacifism and Coercion: The English Baptist Doctrine of Religious Toleration," *MQR* 58 (1984) 3049.

⁸*Baptist Confessions of Faith*, ed. W. L. Lumpkin (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1959) 245.

⁹*Ibid.*, 230-32.

¹⁰E. S. Morgan, *Roger Williams: The Church and the State* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967) 28. Morgan, along with P. Miller in his *Roger Williams: His Contribution to the American Tradition*, has attempted to rescue Williams from the modern liberal historians who read their own agenda back into his life. Along this line, C. Wright has placed Williams' debate with John Cotton in its proper 17th-century context. See his "John Cotton Washed and Made White," *Continuity and Discontinuity in Church History: Essays Presented to George Huntson Williams* (eds. F. F. Church and T. George; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979) 338-50.

¹¹H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987) 517-18.

¹²H. H. Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville Broadman, 1987) 17.

¹³Quoted J. M. Dawson, *Baptists and the American Republic* (Nashville: Broadman, 1956) 221.

¹⁴Hobbs, *Faith and Message*, 3.

¹⁵*Proceedings of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 1845 (Richmond: H. K. Ellyson, 1845) 19.

¹⁶J. P. Boyce, *Three Changes in Theological Institutions* (Greenville: C.J. Elford's Book and Job Press, 1856) 35. This address has been reprinted in T. George, *James Petigru Boyce: Selected Writings* (Nashville: Broadman, 1989).

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁸J. A. Broadus, *Memoir of James P. Boyce* (New York: Armstrong and Son, 1893) 140. T. J. Nettles, "Creedalism, Confessionalism, and the Baptist Faith and Message," *The Unfettered Word* (ed. R. B. James; Waco: Word Books, 1987) 138-54, has shown how deeply rooted in Southern Baptist history is the appeal to clear confessional guidelines. For example, he quotes B. H. Carroll who declared, "The modern cry, 'Less creed and more liberty,' is a degeneration from the vertebrate to the jellyfish, and means less unity and less morality, and it means more heresy . . . It is a positive and very hurtful sin to magnify liberty at the expense of doctrine." *Ibid.*, 148. W. B. Shurden, on the other hand, has interpreted the growing confessional consciousness in Southern Baptist life as a threat to traditional Baptist freedoms. See his "The Problem of Authority in the Southern Baptist Convention," *Rev Exp* 75 (1978) 219-33. A similar opinion is expressed by J. J. Hurt: "Should Southern Baptists Have a Creed/Confession?--No!" *Rev Exp* 76 (1979) 85-88.

¹⁹J. P. Boyce, "The Doctrinal Position of the Seminary," *Western Recorder*, June 20, 1874.

²⁰*Annual*, Southern Baptist Convention, 1923.

²¹K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, 630. For a fuller statement of the role of theology in this process, see T. George, "Dogma Beyond Anathema: Historical Theology in the Service of the Church," *Rev Exp* 84 (1987) 691-713.

²²W. S. Hudson, ed., *Baptist Concepts of the Church* (Chicago: Judson, 1959) 215-216.

²³Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, (1966) 314.

²⁴LW 36, p. 140.

²⁵C. Marney, not known for his traditionalism, understood correctly the communal character of Luther's emphasis: "There, where you and They are--you, all of you are the ministry of the Word. This does not mean that you are competent to deal with God for yourself. It means rather than you are competent and responsible to deal with God and for the neighbor. It was a gross perversion of the gospel that inserted a bastard individualism here and then taught us that the believer's priesthood meant that 'every tub must set on its own bottom.'" *Priests to Each Other* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1974) 12.

²⁶LW 39, pp. 154-55. This quotation is from Luther's "Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book by Goat Emser in Leipzig" (1521) which contains his fullest development of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

²⁷D. W. Torrance and T. R. Torrance, eds. *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 12.144: *Comm. Heb.*

10:25. Cf. also T. F. Torrance's *Royal Priesthood* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1955).

²⁸C. Eastwood, *The Priesthood of All Believers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1960) 80. The renowned Baptist theologian, R. Aldwinkle, made a similar point in his address on "The Nature and Purpose of Our Freedom," which he delivered at the Baptist World Alliance meeting in 1965. "Yet in our claims to freedom . . . Baptists need to be on guard against a serious misunderstanding of the priesthood of all believers as this was understood by the Protestant Reformers. When Peter applies the phrase 'an holy priesthood' (I Pet. 2:5) to the whole body of believing Christians, he reminds us that we are priests only as members of the Christian fellowship. The priesthood of all believers does not mean only the right to private judgment and intellectual freedom, which Socrates and Bertrand Russell would also stoutly maintain, but the freedom within the community of believers to be, as Luther said, Christ to our neighbor, to show forth the special kind of love and compassion which flows from Christ and works in those who are members of His body, the church. When we assert freedom from priestly dominance in a sacramental sense, we are not claiming freedom of thought necessarily in a general sense, though this may be important even to Christians. We are claiming freedom to love, as Christ loved, all those for whom He died, and claiming this freedom as members of His fellowship of believers. In repudiating a certain understanding of the church, we are not repudiating entirely the importance of the church as the redeemed community through which God works." W. B. Shurden, ed., *The Life of Baptists in the Life of the World* (Nashville: Broadman 1985) 214.



¹The 1988 SBC resolution on "Priesthood of the Believer" has provoked a firestorm of controversy. Among the many discussions in Baptist state papers, see V. Davis, "Southern Baptists and 'Priesthood,'" *Florida Baptist Witness*, July 14, 1988, and T. George, "Priesthood of the Believers-Refocusing the Debate," *Florida Baptist Witness*, October 1988. See also W. B. Shurden, *Priesthood of Believers* (Nashville: Convention, 1987).

²J. M. Frost, "Introduction," *Baptist Why and Why Not* (Nashville: Sunday School Board, 1900) 12.

³Mullins referred to soul competency as the "religious axiom," and regarded it as the basis for the Baptist rejection of infant baptism. E.Y. Mullins et al., *The Faith and Its Furtherance* (Nashville: Broadman, 1936) 51-64.

⁴W. T. Conner, *Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Broadman, 1937) 17. Cf. the following statement by J. P. Boyce: "the recognition and contemplation of such a [self-existent spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable] . . . awaken reverence and fear . . . and lead men everywhere, when in danger or distress, to call upon God . . .," *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1899) 30. See also A. Hovey, *Manual of Christian Theology* (New York: Silver, Burdett, and Co., 1900) 33-40.

⁵Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (eds. J. T. McNeill and F. L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 43-51 [I. 34].

⁶B. H. Carroll, *Baptist and Their Doctrines* (New York: Fleming Revell, 1913) 15.

⁷Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (London 1612) 46. For a fuller treatment of Helwys in the context of the early Baptist literature of toleration, see T. George, "Between Pacifism and Coercion: The English Baptist Doctrine of Religious Toleration," *MQR* 58 (1984) 3049.

⁸*Baptist Confessions of Faith*, ed. W. L. Lumpkin (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1959) 245.

⁹*Ibid.*, 230-32.

¹⁰E. S. Morgan, *Roger Williams: The Church and the State* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967) 28. Morgan, along with P. Miller in his *Roger Williams: His Contribution to the American Tradition*, has attempted to rescue Williams from the modern liberal historians who read their own agenda back into his life. Along this line, C. Wright has placed Williams' debate with John Cotton in its proper 17th-century context. See his "John Cotton Washed and Made White," *Continuity and Discontinuity in Church History: Essays Presented to George Huntson Williams* (eds. F. F. Church and T. George; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979) 338-50.

¹¹H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987) 517-18.

¹²H. H. Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville Broadman, 1987) 17.

¹³Quoted J. M. Dawson, *Baptists and the American Republic* (Nashville: Broadman, 1956) 221.

¹⁴Hobbs, *Faith and Message*, 3.

¹⁵*Proceedings of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 1845 (Richmond: H. K. Ellyson, 1845) 19.

¹⁶J. P. Boyce, *Three Changes in Theological Institutions* (Greenville: C.J. Elford's Book and Job Press, 1856) 35. This address has been reprinted in T. George, *James Petigru Boyce: Selected Writings* (Nashville: Broadman, 1989).

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁸J. A. Broadus, *Memoir of James P. Boyce* (New York: Armstrong and Son, 1893) 140. T. J. Nettles, "Creedalism, Confessionalism, and the Baptist Faith and Message," *The Unfettered Word* (ed. R. B. James; Waco: Word Books, 1987) 138-54, has shown how deeply rooted in Southern Baptist history is the appeal to clear confessional guidelines. For example, he quotes B. H. Carroll who declared, "The modern cry, 'Less creed and more liberty,' is a degeneration from the vertebrate to the jellyfish, and means less unity and less morality, and it means more heresy . . . It is a positive and very hurtful sin to magnify liberty at the expense of doctrine." *Ibid.*, 148. W. B. Shurden, on the other hand, has interpreted the growing confessional consciousness in Southern Baptist life as a threat to traditional Baptist freedoms. See his "The Problem of Authority in the Southern Baptist Convention," *Rev Exp* 75 (1978) 219-33. A similar opinion is expressed by J. J. Hurt: "Should Southern Baptists Have a Creed/Confession?--No!" *Rev Exp* 76 (1979) 85-88.

¹⁹J. P. Boyce, "The Doctrinal Position of the Seminary," *Western Recorder*, June 20, 1874.

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²⁵C. Marney, not known for his traditionalism, understood correctly the communal character of Luther's emphasis: "There, where you and They are--you, all of you are the ministry of the Word. This does not mean that you are competent to deal with God for yourself. It means rather than you are competent and responsible to deal with God and for the neighbor. It was a gross perversion of the gospel that inserted a bastard individualism here and then taught us that the believer's priesthood meant that 'every tub must set on its won bottom.'" *Priests to Each Other* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1974) 12.

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Are Creeds Appropriate for Bible Believing Baptists?

[Tom Nettles](#)

The effort to derive positive benefit from confessions seems so strange to some today that it can hardly be distinguished from the scary "C" word, "creedalism." Though there are valid historical and practical distinctions between the use of statements of faith as a creed and their use as a confession, those distinctions hardly apply to the current fear of either "creeds" or "confessions."

Baptist Objections to Creeds

The Baptist marriage to confessional theology has endured many an appearance at divorce court. Now bloody and blue Baptists are claiming to have been battered so thoroughly that a complete separation is necessary for survival. Others claim that the marriage never took place. The Baptist historian Thomas Armitage clearly expressed one way of thinking about creeds.

That the book called the Bible is given by the inspiration of God, and is the only rule of Christian faith and practice. The consequence is, that we have no creeds, nor catechisms, nor decretals, which bind us by their authority. We think a creed worth nothing, unless it is supported by Scriptural authority, and if the creed is founded on the word of God, we do not see why we should not rest on that word which props up the creed; we prefer to go back directly to the foundation itself and rest there alone. If it is able to sustain us, we need nothing else, and if it is not, then we cannot rest upon a creed to support us when that creed has no support for itself.[\[1\]](#)

The preface to the *Baptist Faith and Message* of 1963 claims that its writers acted upon the principle of a "Baptist aversion for all creeds but the Bible." And of course there is John Leland's exclamatory question, "Why this Virgin Mary between the souls of men and the scriptures?" followed by a statement embodying another suspicion of confessions: "Confessions of faith often check any further pursuit after truth."[\[2\]](#) The union of Separate and Regular Baptists in Virginia was hindered briefly because of the Separates' fear that a confession might usurp "a tyrannical power over the conscience."[\[3\]](#) In addition, the Anglican practice of granting confirmation upon the memorization of the Prayer Book catechism has tended to make "creedalism" a virtual synonym for nominal Christianity.[\[4\]](#)

In summary, four objections to the serious use of confessions, or creeds, have appeared historically and continue to appear today. First, in the spirit of Thomas Armitage, many sincerely urge in opposition to confessions the principle of *sola scriptura*. Second, some argue that the use of confessions will give a false confidence that scripture truth is exhausted by the confession and thus stunt true growth in the knowledge of the Scriptures. A person will feel that knowledge of the confession is enough and will consequently isolate himself from the dynamic of the living Word of God. Third, a confession can be used in such a way as to repress genuine searching, give artificial answers to questions, and threaten those who are in a stage of inquiry, thereby tyrannizing the tender consciences of believers. Fourth, mental assent to the doctrines of the confession has often served as a substitute for true conversion and has led to dead orthodoxy.

Objections Generally Considered

Stewardship of our spiritual heritage requires that these four areas of concern be addressed with candor and seriousness, for they have not arisen in a vacuum. Any use of confessions that does indeed usurp the place of Scripture should be rejected, or at least corrected, immediately. In addition, no place should be given to a confession as an exhaustive synthesis of biblical truth. Always we must confess, "God has more light yet to break forth from his most holy Word." Neither should the confessional ideal be allowed to tyrannize the conscience of any person. A sensitive and balanced use for

education and discipline need not thwart earnest inquiry or repress anyone's conscience. Finally, any deleterious effects that confessionalism would have on one's understanding of the true nature of saving faith or the absolute necessity of the new birth are much to be lamented and scrupulously avoided. Some who are convinced of the power and clarity of the gospel point to historical manifestations as evidence of these tendencies in the use of confessions. They must be shown that what they fear is more the product of non-confessionalism than confessionalism.

Second, we contend that Baptists have always recognized and avoided these dangers. Since these are abuses, they are not considered essential to the real strength of confessions. Most of them arise from the use of confessions in an establishmentarian situation. The union of church and state brings many more evils to the church than just the abuse of confessions. The abuse of Scripture, the abuse of law, the abuse of the state, the abuse of the church, and the abuse of the penal system all result from establishmentarianism. The abuse, however, does not call for the elimination of any of those institutions, but does require their purification from the sinful awkwardness of the church/state union. This historical reality explains John Leland's quip, "It is sometimes said that hereticks are always averse to confessions of faith. I wish I could say as much of tyrants." [\[5\]](#)

A third general observation about these objections points to the tendency we have to invest power in any study help or authority figure. The development of the doctrine of papal infallibility shows how far this abuse can be carried. On a more diminished scale but in accordance with the same principle one may observe Sunday School teachers placing greater confidence in the word of the teachers' quarterly than in the clarity of the Word of God. But neither of these abuses means that we should eschew biblical submission to a minister who is apt to teach or that we should reject commentary aid in understanding Scripture.

Objections Particularly Examined

Contra Sola Scriptura?

Now we must ask, "Does a conscientious use of a Confession of Faith usurp the rightful place of Scripture in one's faith and practice?" If the confession were like the articles of the Council of Trent, we would have to say, "Yes." The Council of Trent places unwritten tradition alongside Scripture as an authority and claims that the church alone (the pope) has the right to interpret Scripture. But Protestant confessions have virtually always displayed and defended the sole authority of Scripture and have resisted attempts to establish doctrines in any way except on its authority. Scripture quotations and Scripture proofs encourage the reader to examine the assertions of the confession in the light of those biblical texts.

In addition, the historical context of these confessions reminds us that their composers, above all men, would have no desire to produce something which would again hide the Word of God from the eyes of people. For example, a reading of the *Confession of the Reformed Churches of France* shows that a humble regard for the limits of Scripture governed the making of the confession. After affirming the doctrine of the Trinity as "decided by ancient Councils" the confession continues, "we receive and agree in all that was therein resolved, as being drawn from the Holy Scriptures, on which alone our faith should be founded, as there is no other witness proper and competent to decide what the majesty of God is but God himself." The two natures of Christ calls for our approval because "we hold the Old and New Testaments as the only rule of our faith, so we receive all that is conformable to them." Prayers for the dead are rejected because they detract from the death of Christ and "We deem it sufficient to hold by the pure doctrine of Holy Scripture, which makes no mention of all this." Service to God must be done in simplicity for we are not allowed to "follow what may have been devised in the brain of other men, but to confine ourselves simply to the purity of Scripture." Following human traditions produces such perversity of doctrine and practice "that we are the more confirmed in not passing the limits of Scripture." The age of the Reformation produced a mountain of confessions; it also inculcated a deep, pure, and passionate commitment to the sole authority of Scripture.

The objection to confessions on the basis of their tendency to supersede the Scripture seems to me to be a chimera. It combines fictitious dangers with the worst features of a Christian communion which confessedly does not operate on the basis of *sofa scriptura*. In actuality, history demonstrates that those who value their confessions also give the most intense

attention to Scripture and have the greatest regard for the purity and consistency of its doctrines. A loss in confidence in the inerrancy and consistency of the Bible naturally produces a skeptical attitude toward confessions of faith.

A radical example of this tendency can be seen in Edward Farley's conviction that we must "refuse to make anything human and historical a timeless absolute, dwelling above the flow of contexts and situations." And with what example does he provide us of that which is "human and historical?" "One refuses to give this status of the timeless and the unconditional to one's denomination, to one's confessions, to one's heritage, even to one's Scripture." Later Farley informs us that "God might be salvifically working through the communities of other religious faiths, that Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Native American religions are genuine faiths, and that because they are, we can learn from them even as they might learn from us."[\[6\]](#)

If Farley is the prophetic voice for anti-confessionalism, we must see clearly that its driving force is the loss of any confidence in human knowledge of absolutes. Not only must the confession fall away, Holy Scripture must follow, and eventually any claim to the uniqueness of redemption by the crucified Christ must be called arrogant and narrow-minded. It appears to me that the mentality of non-confessionalism is much more dangerous and destructive than confessionalism has ever been.

Exhaustive Knowledge Assumed?

"Confessions of faith often check any further pursuit after truth." I have often wished that I could ask John Leland in person what he meant by that. He could mean, as I have indicated above, that some treat a confession of faith as an exhaustive display of biblical truth. Or perhaps he means that truth in this pre-digested form encourages a lazy confidence or artificial absolutes which people fear to transgress, in either case enervating earnest attempts at biblical study and shutting off openness to the biblical arguments of others. When Baptists were persecuted in Virginia and Massachusetts, they were frequently harassed on the basis of violations of the Thirty-nine Articles or the Savoy Declaration and were not given a fair hearing for a defence of their biblical principles. This kind of uncritical and unbiblical confessionalism could very easily lie behind Leland's criticism.

While being sensitive to this abuse, we must nevertheless affirm that advantages far outweigh this possible regrettable use of confessions. In Thomas Scott's search for truth, his examination of the Thirty-nine articles challenged him to an unrelenting search of Scripture moving him from the classical heresies of Socinianism and Arianism to the orthodox doctrine of Christ. Eventually, the Reformation teachings of justification by faith and the doctrines of grace became an integral part of his theology.[\[7\]](#) No more eloquent defense of the principle of *sola scriptura* and of the expansive power of biblical study can be stated than Scott's.[\[8\]](#) Yet this involved no denigration of confessions but exemplified the positive benefit of them.

Instead of truncating one's grasp of truth, confessions and creeds are designed to expand it. Confessions, arising as they do out of the meshing between word and world, warn the reader of destructive interpretations of Scripture and teach him vital truths for which he should search in Scripture.

Violation of Conscience?

The third objection, that confessions tyrannize the conscience, suffers from an uncritical mixture of political theory and ecclesiology. J. P. Boyce referred to this tendency in *Three Changes in Theological Institutions*. He remarked that other denominations think that Baptists have no use for creeds because the principle of liberty of conscience "has forbidden the laying of civil disabilities upon those who have differed from us." In fact, many Baptists have countenanced that opinion and misstated Baptist practice. Boyce says, "Suffice it to say that we have simply maintained that civil disabilities are not the means of punishing the offending members of the church of Christ," and "The ideas which we have held of the spiritual nature of the kingdom of Christ have developed the principle of liberty of conscience and debarred us from the infliction of bodily punishment or the subjection of any civil disability." We must likewise acknowledge that the church's spirituality

impresses on us the "necessity of excluding those who have violated the simplicity which is in Christ."[\[9\]](#)

The complaint that creeds constitute an infringement on the rights of conscience was one of the peculiarities of Alexander Campbell. The logic of this was rejected by Robert Semple of Virginia who called such a view, among others, "contrary to those of Baptists in general." One of the points of contention listed by Baptist associations that excommunicated the followers of Campbell was their claim "that no creed is necessary for the Church, but the Scriptures as they stand."[\[10\]](#) Baptists certainly were not denying the sufficiency of the Scripture nor the necessity of liberty of conscience; but they clearly saw no inconsistency between these convictions and the use of a "creed."

A confession used rightly is a wonderful pedagogical aid for all believers. Subscription to it need not be immediate, but can come by degrees. Some may be too young in the faith to understand its connections and importance. None, however, should oppose the confession. If after mature and thorough study a person concludes that he does not subscribe to the confession, he must determine if the matter is adiaphoristic with him or a matter of conscience. If it is matter of conscience, he may leave without anyone seeking to force him to do otherwise. In this way his conscience is not tyrannized and the unity of the church is not violated. A confessional stance for a church is neither divisive nor tyrannical. Instead, it honors, informs, and protects the conscience of all and aids in the production of unity.

Confessional Regeneration?

The identification of confessional orthodoxy with true Christianity is perhaps the most subtle and historically demonstrable danger of confessional Christianity. The period of Lutheran confessionalism in the 17th century produced strife and contention in German theology but little observable piety. Philip Jacob Spener mourned this condition and spoke of preachers who "have learned something of the letter of the Scriptures, have comprehended and assented to true doctrine, and have even known how to preach it to others," but are personally unacquainted with the "true heavenly light and the life of faith."[\[11\]](#) Spener affirmed the Lutheran Confessions and stated his theology in confessional terms. The major errors of the Pietistic movement he started, however, arose from the non-confessional enthusiasm of his followers.

New England Congregationalism wilted under the wrong use of confessional orthodoxy. This abuse became institutionalized in the Halfway Covenant of 1662. When Separate Baptists arose out of the Congregational New Light movement in the First Great Awakening, they had a legitimate fear of the abuse of confessions. This fear for a while hindered the union of Separate Baptists with the Regular Baptists. The Separates expressed resistance to "being bound and hampered by Articles and Confessions." Eventually, union did occur on the basis of common confessions of faith.

The acceptance of confessions, however, by no means encourages loss of a theology of conversion. Who were more insistent on the new birth in their preaching than George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards? Both were confessional. No one has ever produced a more experiential and conversionistic piece of divinity than Edwards's "A Divine and Supernatural Light, Immediately imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God, Shown to be both a Scriptural and Rational Doctrine." In speaking of God's sovereign, immediate work in regeneration Edwards concludes, "Yea, the least glimpse of the glory of God in the face of Christ doth more exalt and ennoble the soul, than all the knowledge of those that have the greatest speculative understanding in divinity *without grace*."[\[12\]](#)

Edwards highlights the distinction between speculative knowledge and true grace brilliantly in his sermon "True Grace Distinguished from the Experience of Devils" when he says that "no degree of speculative knowledge of religion is any certain sign of true piety." And again, "The devil is orthodox in his faith; he believes the true scheme of doctrine; he is no Deist, Socinian, Arian, Pelagian, or antinomian; the articles of his faith are all sound, and in them he is thoroughly established."[\[13\]](#) These facts in themselves, however, do not make confessional Christianity dangerous any more than they make deism, Socinianism, or Arianism safe. The point is that the new birth is essential in any case, and nothing, even other things given by God, can be substituted for it.

Conclusion

None of the objections to confessional theology are to the point. Either they are directed against abuses or they arise from a latent, or often overt, skepticism. Abuses must be avoided and skepticism must be confronted. Confessions have a positive and edifying contribution to make to the life of the church and the individual Christian.



Preaching the Doctrines of Grace

We may invigorate our faith and renew our courage by reflecting that divine power has always attended the preaching of doctrine, when done in the true spirit of preaching. Great revivals have accompanied the heroic preaching of the doctrines of grace, predestination, election, and that whole lofty mountain range of doctrines upon which Jehovah sits enthroned, sovereign in grace as in all else. God honors the preaching that honors him. There is entirely too much milk-sop preaching nowadays, trying to cajole sinners to enter upon a truce with their Maker, quit sinning, and join the church. The situation does not call for a truce, but for a surrender. Let us bring out the heavy artillery of heaven, and thunder away at this stuck-up age as Whitfield, Edwards, Spurgeon, and Paul did, and there will be many slain of the Lord raised up to walk in newness of life.

People after all, want to hear preaching with substance in it. The truth was made for human hearts as certainly as bread was made for human mouths. A ministry strong and tender, true to the Word of God, will never be a slighted ministry. I am deeply convinced that there should be a return to doctrinal preaching, taking care to keep clear of the faults of the professional religious pugilist. This is true with respect to doctrine in general; it is specially true of the doctrines which Baptists are peculiarly bound to hold aloft before the world.

J. B. Gambrell (early SBC statesman)



¹Thomas Armitage, "Baptist Faith and Practice" in C. A. Jenkyns, Ed., *Baptist Doctrines* (Chancy R. Barns: St. Louis, 1882), p. 34.

²Quoted in *The Unfettered Word*, ed. Robison James (Waco: Word Books, 1987), p. 139. This work is quoted in a preface to an article entitled "Creedalism, Confessionalism, and the Baptist Faith and Message" I wrote for this book. The editor seeks to present a case for the "noncreedal inclinations of Southern Baptists." Some of those concerns are addressed in this article. With permission of the editor, Robison B. James, I hope to publish a slightly edited version of that article in the next issue of *The Founders Journal*.

³Robert A. Baker, *A Baptist Sourcebook* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966), p. 22.

⁴*The Book of Common Prayer* states:

So soon as children are come to a competent age, and can say in their Mother-tongue the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the ten Commandments; and also can answer to the other questions of this short Catechism; they shall be brought to the Bishop. And every one shall have a God-father, or a God-mother, as a witness of their Confirmation.

⁵James, p. 139.

⁶Edward Farley, "The Modernist Element in Protestantism," in *Theology Today* XLVII. no. 2, pp. 141, 143. Farley is Professor of Theology, Vanderbilt University Divinity School. Two of the major burdens of Farley's article are the "revisability of confessions" and the "historical approach" to Scripture. He would like to see many more modernist themes inserted into Presbyterian confessions and seems modestly congenial to the Confession of 1967 because of its recognition that the Scriptures are "nevertheless the words of men" and conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary styles of different cultures and historical situations. It is obvious that he recognizes that strong confessionalism tends to retard relativistic concepts of Scripture.

⁷See Thomas Scott, *The Force of Truth*. The edition I have used also contains his sermons "Growth in Grace," "Repentance," and "Election and Perseverance." (Halifax: William Milner, 1844) pp. 7-98. The book was first published in 1779. In the preface to the ninth edition published in 1812, Scott wrote, "[The Author] is more fully than ever confirmed in his judgment respecting the doctrine contained in it." Scott's account of the interaction between his reading of evangelical literature, his contemplation of the church's creed, and his personal Bible study form one of the most interesting studies of theological pilgrimage with which I am acquainted. He confesses that the doctrine of the Trinity of coequal persons in the unity of the Godhead had been no part of his creed and that he had "quarrelled with the articles of the established church about this doctrine" (p. 53). The universal witness of the creeds, however, plus reading contemporary literature constrained him to careful examination and intense meditation on the Scriptures eventually leading him to adopt the doctrine of a "Trinity in Unity." Likewise, his struggle toward the doctrines of grace involved the same interplay. Scott recalls:

Hitherto I had wilfully passed over and neglected, or endeavoured to put some other construction upon, all those parts of Scripture which directly speak of them: but now I began to consider, meditate, and pray over them; and I soon found that I could not support my former interpretations. They would teach predestination, election, and final perseverance, in spite of all my wresting and expounding. It also occurred to me, that these doctrines, though now in disgrace, were universally believed and maintained by our venerable reformers; that they were admitted at the beginning of the reformation, into the creeds, catechisms, or articles of every one of the protestant churches; that our articles and homilies expressly maintain them; and consequently, that a vast number of wise and sober-minded men, . . . had upon mature deliberation, agreed, . . . that they were true, . . . useful, [and] . . . necessary articles of faith (p. 60).

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 80-86. At one point Scott says, "We are likewise too prone, in availing ourselves of the labours of critics and expositors, to resign up ourselves implicitly to their guidance, and to imagine that we have proof enough of our doctrines, if we can produce the sanction of some great name that has espoused and maintained them, without carefully examining whether they be right or wrong: but that is to pay that deference to the human interpretation, which is due only to the divine book commented on."

⁹J. P. Boyce, "Three Changes in Theological Institutions," in Timothy George, ed. *James Petigru Boyce: Selected Writings* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1989) pp. 55, 56.

¹⁰Baker, *Sourcebook*, p. 78.

¹¹Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964) trans. Theodore G. Tappert, p. 46.

¹²Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2:17. Italics mine.

¹³Edwards, p. 43.



¹Thomas Armitage, "Baptist Faith and Practice" in C. A. Jenkyns, Ed., *Baptist Doctrines* (Chancy R. Barns: St. Louis, 1882), p. 34.

²Quoted in *The Unfettered Word*, ed. Robison James (Waco: Word Books, 1987), p. 139. This work is quoted in a preface to an article entitled "Creedalism, Confessionalism, and the Baptist Faith and Message" I wrote for this book. The editor seeks to present a case for the "noncreedal inclinations of Southern Baptists." Some of those concerns are addressed in this article. With permission of the editor, Robison B. James, I hope to publish a slightly edited version of that article in the next issue of *The Founders Journal*.

³Robert A. Baker, *A Baptist Sourcebook* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966), p. 22.

⁴*The Book of Common Prayer* states:

So soon as children are come to a competent age, and can say in their Mother-tongue the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the ten Commandments; and also can answer to the other questions of this short Catechism; they shall be brought to the Bishop. And every one shall have a God-father, or a God-mother, as a witness of their Confirmation.

⁵James, p. 139.

⁶Edward Farley, "The Modernist Element in Protestantism," in *Theology Today* XLVII. no. 2, pp. 141, 143. Farley is Professor of Theology, Vanderbilt University Divinity School. Two of the major burdens of Farley's article are the "revisability of confessions" and the "historical approach" to Scripture. He would like to see many more modernist themes inserted into Presbyterian confessions and seems modestly congenial to the Confession of 1967 because of its recognition that the Scriptures are "nevertheless the words of men" and conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary styles of different cultures and historical situations. It is obvious that he recognizes that strong confessionalism tends to retard relativistic concepts of Scripture.

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Doctrine and Devotion (Part 1)

Ernest Reisinger

"Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine." "Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you. " 1 Timothy 4:13,16

These two passages of scripture bring together what should never be separated, that is, doctrine and devotion; belief and practice; biblical truth clothed with genuine Christian experience. What God has joined together let no man put asunder.

Doctrine is to Christian experience what bones are to the body. A body without bones would be a lump of "glob" utterly useless. Likewise, Christian experience without roots is like cut flowers stuck in the ground--they may look pleasant for awhile, but ultimately they will wither and die.

The other side of this truth must also be taken into account, that is, bones without flesh are but a dead skeleton

The Westminster Confession, the 2nd London Confession, and the Heidelberg Catechism are the clearest expressions of the doctrinal truth from the Bible. However, there is one thing lacking in these respected confessions. What is lacking? *People! Christian experience!* It has been a life-time goal and desire to bring together sound biblical doctrine and genuine Christian experience, both in my own life and in my teaching and practice. I have not arrived at this goal but I am still seeking, desiring and yearning for this rare combination.

There are those who cry "down doctrine" and cry "up experience." Some think it quite pious to say, "Christ is our creed and the Bible is our text book." On the surface that sounds good. But which Christ are they talking about? There are a thousand Christs on the religious market. The Jehovah Witnesses have a Christ but it is not the Christ of the Bible. The Mormons have a Christ but it is not the Christ of the Bible. Christian Science has a Christ but it is not the Christ of the Bible. The liberals have a Christ but not the One who came to us by a virgin's womb, suffered vicariously on a Roman cross and rose victoriously from a borrowed grave. But there is only one biblical Christ. The cults also say the Bible is their text book. You see, some one must proclaim what this infallible Bible says and what it means and how it applies to our lives and the life of the church.

B. H. Carroll, in his commentary on Ephesians, underscores the importance of doctrine and creeds:

A church with a little creed is a church with a little life. The more divine doctrines a church can agree on, the greater its power, and the wider its usefulness. The fewer its articles of faith, the fewer its bonds of union and compactness.

The modern cry: 'Less creed and more liberty,' is a degeneration from the vertebrate to the jellyfish, and means less unity and less morality, and it means more heresy. Definitive truth does not create heresy--it only exposes and corrects. Shut off the creed and the Christian world would fill up with heresy unsuspected and uncorrected, but none the less deadly.

Just so it is not good discipline that created backsliding and other sins of Christians. But discipline is oftentimes the only means of saving a church. To hold to discipline for immoralities and relax it on

doctrine puts the cart before the horse and attempts to heal a stream while leaving the fountain impure. To Christ and the apostles false creeds were the most deadly things, and called most for the use of the knife. . . .

Again, I solemnly warn the reader against all who depreciate creeds, or who would reduce them to a minimum of entrance qualifications into the church (*An Interpretation of the English Bible: Colossians, Ephesians, and Hebrews*, pp. 140-41, 150).

Now, I hope we are all against substituting a dead, doctrinal creed for a living Christ. But our creed need not be dead--just as our faith should not be dead faith. We do not reject true faith because there is dead faith (James 2:20: "faith without works is dead").

It is not enough to speak of a mystical experience with God without doctrinal knowledge. We must worship God in truth as well as Spirit. Truth can be stated in real words, and when truth is stated in real words, it is doctrine.

This effort to be a practicing Christian without knowing what Christianity is all about will always fail. The true Christian has a doctrinal foundation. The conflict between our Lord and the Pharisees was over the question of *Who He Was*--the doctrine of the Messiah.

To believe savingly in Christ involves believing the right things about him. Who He Was--the virgin born Son of God. What He Did--suffered vicariously on a Roman cross. Why He Died on that cross--because of a covenant with God the Father to redeem an innumerable company of sheep from every tribe, nation and tongue.

What is true religion? It is not some mystical, nebulous thing, floating around in the sky. True religion cannot be less than:

Right thinking in respect to God
Right feeling in respect to God
Right acting in respect to God

True religion must reach the whole man: his mind--what he thinks with; his affections--what he feels with, and his will--what he decides with.

What Is Christian Experience?

Christian experience is the influence of sound biblical doctrine applied to the mind, affections and will by the Holy Spirit. J.C. Ryle said, "You can talk about Christian experience all you wish, but without doctrinal roots it is like cut flowers stuck in the ground--it will wither and die."

It is impossible therefore, to over-emphasize the importance of sound doctrine in the Christian life. Right thinking about all spiritual matters is imperative if we are to have right living. As men do not gather grapes of thorns, nor figs of thistles, so sound Christian character does not grow out of unsound doctrine.

Someone may ask, "How do we test true Christian experience in the midst of so much spurious experience and religious confusion?" Let me suggest three tests:

1. Is this professed religious experience produced by the truth plainly and faithfully presented? It must be biblical truth--not only feeling and emotion or religious excitement.
2. Is this professed religious experience regulated and governed by biblical truth?
3. Do the subjects of this professed religious experience manifest a general and cordial love of biblical truth?

Biblical doctrine is more important than most church members realize. Doctrine not only expresses our experiences and beliefs, it also determines our direction. Doctrine shapes our lives and church programs. Doctrine to the Christian and the church is what the bones are to the body. It gives unity and stability.

The church that neglects to teach sound biblical doctrine weakens the church membership. It works against true unity. It invites instability in its fellowship, lessens conviction and stalemates true progress in the church.

I suppose that not many would disagree with what I have said up until now. But I do not just want to speak in general, nebulous terms. Take, for example, the word "doctrine." By itself it is almost meaningless. All the cults have a doctrine. I want to be more specific and speak of the doctrines believed and preached by our Baptist fathers--men such as James P. Boyce, John A Broadus, B.H. Carroll, John L. Dagg, Luther Rice, P.H. Mell, John Bunyan, Charles H. Spurgeon, William Carey, Andrew Fuller. Yes, those doctrines expressed by The Philadelphia Association out of which we came. The doctrines that were the foundation of their devotion, of their worship, their witness, and all their service to Christ and His church.

Before I mention specifically some foundational doctrines let me just make one simple but weighty point: if what our Baptist fathers believed and taught was true then it is just as true and just as important today because the Bible has not changed, truth is unchanged, and God is unchanged. The minds of men are like porous sieves out of which truth can leak and into which error may seep to dilute the truth. But truth does not change because God Himself does not change.

Specifically, What Doctrines Am I Talking About?

Foundational doctrines. Not secondary matters. I am talking about those doctrines that were set forth, defined and defended at the Synod of Dort in 1618--later expressed in The Westminster Confession and The Baptist Confession of 1689, called The Second London Confession.

I mean those doctrines that set forth a God who saves. Not this little god who just helps man to save himself. Those doctrines that reveal the three great acts of the Trinity for the recovering of poor, helpless, lost men. What are these three great acts?

Election by the Father
Redemption by the Son
Calling by the Spirit

All directed to the same individuals and secure their salvation infallibly. Away with this wicked idea of giving each act of the Trinity a different reference:

1. The objects of redemption being ALL mankind.
2. The objects of calling being those who hear the gospel.
3. The objects of election being those hearers who respond.

No! No! I mean those doctrines which give all the glory of saving sinners to God and do not divide it between God and the sinner. Those doctrines which see the Creator as the source and the end of everything both in nature and in grace. Those doctrines which say history is nothing less than the working out of God's preordained plan. Those doctrines that set forth the God who was sovereign in creation, sovereign in redemption (both in planning it and perfecting it), and sovereign in providence--sovereign on the contemporary scene and sovereign right now. Those doctrines that set forth a Redeemer who actually redeems; a God who saves by purpose and by power; the Trinity working together for just that--the salvation of sinners. The Father plans it. The Son achieves it. And the Holy Spirit communicates and effectually applies it to God's elect. Those doctrines that set forth a God who saves, keeps, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners--and loses none in the process.

God saves sinners! We must not weaken this great truth that God saves sinners by disrupting the unity of the work of the Trinity, or by dividing the achievement of salvation between God and man. Jonah had it straight in Jonah 2:9: "Salvation [past, present, and future] is of the Lord."

These doctrines trace the source of every spiritual blessing--faith included--back to that great transaction between God and His Son which was carried out on Calvary's Hill.

The Spirit's gift is not just an enlightening work. It is also a regenerating work of God in men: taking away their heart of stone and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills; and by His almighty power determining them and causing them to come--not against their will, but to come most freely, being made willing by His grace.

"Blessed is the man whom thou choosest, and causest to approach unto thee, that he may dwell in thy courts: we shall be satisfied with the goodness of thy house, even of thy holy temple," Psalm 65:4.

And in this sense grace proves to be irresistible. Why? Just because grace destroys man's power to resist.

Though this is all the sovereign work of God let us not suppose that God's decision to save a man by a decree leaves man passive and inert. It is the opposite that takes place! The covenant of grace does not kill man, it does not regard man as a tin can, a piece of wood or a robot. It takes possession of the man, it lays hold of his whole being with all his faculties and power of soul and body, for time and eternity.

1. It does not annihilate his powers, but it does remove his powerlessness.
2. It does not destroy his will, but frees it from sin.
3. It does not stifle or obliterate his conscience, but sets it free from darkness.
4. It regenerates and recreates man in his entirety, and in renewing him by grace, causes him to love and consecrate himself to God most freely.

These doctrines show the cross as revealing God's power to save, not His impotence. The cross was not a place just to make salvation possible, but to actually secure the salvation of sinners, fulfilling that prophecy of the great evangelical prophet Isaiah. Isa. 53:11: "He shall see the travail of his soul and be satisfied." God was not frustrated at the cross.

The Bible says, "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (Acts 2:23). God was the Master of Ceremonies at the cross!

William Cowper expressed it in his hymn, "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood"--"Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood shall never lose its power, till all the ransomed Church of God be saved to sin no more."

These doctrines will drive us to proclaim to every one:

1. All are sinners--not sick and need help, but DEAD and need life.
2. That Jesus Christ, God's Son is a perfect, able and willing Saviour of sinners, even the worst, yea, even the chiefest.
3. That the Father and the Son have promised that all who know themselves to be such sinners and put their faith in Christ as Saviour shall be received into favor and none cast out.
4. That God has made repentance and faith a duty, requiring of every man, who hears the the gospel, a serious and full casting of the soul upon Christ as an all-sufficient Saviour. Ready, able, and willing to save ALL that come to God by Him.

To the question, "What must I do to be saved?" we must say, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." What does that mean? It means: (1) Knowing oneself to be a sinner. (2) Knowing Christ to have died for sinners. (3) Abandoning all self-righteousness, self-confidence and self-effort. (4) Casting yourself wholly upon Him for pardon and peace. (5) Exchanging your natural enmity and rebellion against Him for a spirit of grateful submission to the will of Christ through the renewing of your heart by the Holy Spirit.

He Will Give What He Requires

To the question, "How am I to go about believing on Christ and repenting if I have no natural ability to do these things?"

ANSWER: Look to Christ--Seek Him--Cry out to Christ just as you are, casting yourself upon His mercy. He will give what He requires. Turn to Him. Trust Him as best you can and pray for grace to trust more. Use the means of grace, expectantly looking for Christ to draw near to you as you seek to draw near to Him.

Watch and pray. Read and hear God's Word. Worship and commune with God's people, and so continue until you know within, without a doubt, that you are indeed a changed being, a penitent believer, believing the new heart that you desired has been put within you. Calling upon Him directly is the first step.

The hymn writer put it like this:

Let not conscience make you linger
Nor of fitness fondly dream,
All the fitness He requireth
Is to feel your need of Him.

Christ is not passively waiting, but working with and through the Word to bring His people to Himself.

Much of contemporary Christianity is sick because it lacks a doctrinal foundation. The religion of our day is a curious mixture of Bible, philosophy, notions of the day, and a strange combination of methods. In spite of its numerical increase and the millions of dollars raised for religious purposes, much of present-day religion is spiritually and morally sick; it is like a body without bones. Doctrine is to Christian experience what bones are to the

body.

[\[Go to Part 2\]](#)



Cultivate Truth

The unattended garden will soon be overrun with weeds; the heart that fails to cultivate truth and root out error will shortly be a theological wilderness.

-A. W. Tozer



News

The 1991 Southern Baptist Founders Youth Conference

Registrations are being accepted for this camp which convenes June 24-28 in Panama City, FL. Drs. Fred Malone and Tom Ascol will be this year's speakers addressing the theme, "Building Godly Relationships." Cost is \$150.00. Early registrants receive prime accommodations. For more information contact SBFYC Secretary Cindy Kemp, FBC P. O. Box 552, Clinton, LA 70722; (504) 683-5153.

Mormons Converting Southern Baptists

Statistics from the Interfaith Witness Department indicate that last year there were 42,000 Mormon missionaries actively propagating their faith. Over the same time period 285 Southern Baptists **a week** were converted to this sect.

(See the correction in [FJ 5 News](#).)

Phil Roberts to Romania

Dr. Phil Roberts, evangelism professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, NC, has recently been named Academic Dean of the new Institute of Biblical Studies in Romania. The Institute, which includes a theological seminary, was inaugurated October 4, 1990 with 60 students enrolled.



Book Reviews

Baptist Church Covenants by Charles W. Deweese; 1990, Broadman \$12.95.

Reviewed by [Joe Nesom](#)

In *Baptist Church Covenants*, Charles Deweese has done for church covenants what McGlothlin and Lumpkin did for the historic Baptist confessions of faith. He has brought to light many examples of church covenants used by Baptists, such as those found in the manuals of Newton Brown and Edward Hiscox, which have gained widespread acceptance, as well as others which illustrate the abundance of covenants which were written for the use of but one congregation.

Deweese provides us with seventy-nine examples ranging from the splendid covenant of the Baptist church at Caerlon in Wales to that of the Hwe Ching Baptist Church of China. The earliest covenant is from 1640, the latest from 1985.

In addition to its being an excellent source of the documents themselves, we have in *Baptist Church Covenants* a challenging discussion of the relationship between the covenanting impulse and the historic Baptist call for a regenerate church membership. In a day when "decisionism" is synonymous with evangelism in most churches and when church discipline has largely disappeared, Deweese seeks to call us to an examination of existing practices through the study of our covenantal heritage. According to Deweese "the time is ripe for a disciplinary reawakening in Baptist life."

To that I say a hearty Amen!

A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith by Samuel E. Waldron: Evangelical Press, 1989, \$24.95.

Reviewed by [Chuck Todd](#)

This book is an excellent treatment of an excellent confession of faith. The author, Sam Waldron, is a pastor of the Reformed Baptist Church, Grand Rapids, MI. He skillfully employs church history and theology as he examines the similarities and differences between the 1689 (Second London) Baptist Confession and its cousins, the Westminster Confession (Presbyterian), the Savoy Declaration (Congregationalist), and the Baptist Confession of 1644 (which is also known as the First London Confession). A proper emphasis is maintained respecting the inclusive unity of spirit and understanding among these various Calvinistic groups.

One very valuable aspect of this work is its treatment of present trends in the church. Pastor Waldron refers to various false teachings as he expounds the 1689's thirty-two chapters and even brings to light some present error not anticipated in the confession. One such subject is inerrancy, which receives a masterful treatment in the first chapter.

A carefully balanced treatment of God, man, and salvation is to be found throughout this work. The erroneous half-

truths and falsehoods of both Hyper-calvinism and Arminianism are exposed and an evangelistic fervor is evident in the midst of the polemics.

Several sections in this work merit careful rereading. Chapter 21 ("Of Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience") is one such example as is Chapter 22 on "Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day." Reading *Shepherding God's Flock* (edited by Roger Beardmore) and *God's Righteous Kingdom* (Walter Chantry) in conjunction with these sections will prove beneficial.

Another valuable feature of the book is the introduction by R. P. Martin which sets forth the legitimacy and use of confessions.

Since the 1689 confession was adopted by the Philadelphia and Charleston Associations, and exerted much influence on Baptists in America (especially Southern Baptists) it should be of particular interest to the readers of this journal. Many more are the reasons why you should personally obtain a copy of this book to read and study in your Christian pilgrimage.



1991 Southern Baptist Founders Conference

*meeting for the first time at
Samford University
Birmingham, Alabama
July 23-26, 1991*

"A Savior Who Is Christ the Lord"

Speakers:

Mr. Geoffrey Thomas
Dr. Don Whitney
Mr. Bill Ascol
Dr. Tom Nettles
Dr. Walter Johnson
Dr. Fred Malone
Dr. Roger Nicole

Cost per person: \$130 (includes room, 8 meals, and registration)

For information write:

Southern Baptist Founders Conference
P. O. Box 150931
Cape Coral, FL 33915
(813) 772-1400, FAX (813) 772-1140

