



When We Talk About Heresy, Let's Be Honest

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When We Talk About Heresy, Let's Be Honest

Tom Ascol

Torquemada's name, with clouds o'ercast,
Looms in the distant landscape of the past
Like a burnt tower upon a blackened heath,
Lit by the fires of burning woods beneath.
--Henry W. Longfellow

Heresy. The mere mention of the word conjures up images of witch trials and invokes the memory of the notorious Spanish Grand Inquisitor, Thomas de Torquemada. It is a word which has become obsolete in the modern church, and the truth is that most evangelicals actually prefer it that way. If you want to ruin your next Sunday School class party, just wait for a break in the conversation and ask, "Why do you think we don't hear much about heresy anymore?"

Amid the quizzical looks ("What planet is this guy from?") and nervous laughter you probably will not get many thoughtful responses. That's because we don't think about such things anymore. Out of sight, out of mind. The modern atheological mind has been so shaped by the ideology of pluralism that it no longer has the categories with which to evaluate doctrinal deviancy. Consequently, heresy has become passé.

This could only happen where truth has become relatively unimportant. As David Wells and others have forcefully argued, such is the condition of American evangelicalism. Subjective experience has deposed objective truth as the foundation of evangelical Christianity. Whereas the New Testament regards doctrine as essential to the life of faith, most of our churches have no place for it on their priority lists. It follows that if sound doctrine is considered negotiable in the church, then false teaching will be looked on, at best, with ambivalence. Where such low esteem of truth prevails, heresy is not even a possibility.

This explains what is happening in Macon, Georgia, at Mercer University and among moderate Southern Baptists in the wake of Kirby Godsey's provocative new book, *When We Talk about God, Let's Be Honest*. Godsey, who is President of Mercer, has provided more grist for conservative Southern Baptists' mill. The theological positions which he stakes out in this volume have made even a few of his fellow moderates nervous.

His book teaches heresy. This is a serious charge and should never be made lightly. Mere doctrinal idiosyncrasies or goofy ideas do not qualify. Neither do views which are simply unorthodox (not up to what they ought to be) or heterodox (beyond what they ought to be). Heresy has been succinctly defined by Michael Horton as "any teaching that directly contradicts the clear and direct witness of the Scriptures on a point of salvific importance." Unfortunately, Godsey's book meets the criteria.

His intention is to write "devotional theology" (p. 7) not primarily to give instruction but to promote an approach to faith which is serious enough "to talk about it" (p. 5). Consequently the style of the book is dialogical and testimonial. Godsey invites the reader to a literary fireside chat about the author's experiences as a person of faith.

This method will undoubtedly appeal to the egalitarian spirit of this age. For Godsey, it is dishonest to assume that any one opinion is superior to others. "When it comes to honest talk about God, there are no right answers" (p. 4),

which, of course, conversely means that neither are there any wrong answers. What schoolboy would not like to take all of his exams from this kind of teacher? Godsey's statement reminds me of Spurgeon's reference to the man who "went to school and said of it, 'None of us know'd nothin', and we each larn'd one another.'"

Godsey's intentions are commendable. He writes partly in reaction to the superficial religion which he encountered as a child growing up in the Bible belt and which he suspects inevitably lives on in conservative Christian circles. He is concerned that the Christian faith is too often reduced to mere acceptance of a set of theoretical doctrines.

So far, so good. There is much shallow teaching masquerading as biblical Christianity today, and it ought to be exposed. Authentic faith is capable of entertaining doubt and of grappling with profound questions which cannot be answered with clever platitudes. Godsey is to be commended for trying to make this point and encouraging believers to move beyond trivial notions of faith which permeate American evangelicalism.

Tragically, his solution is more deadly than the problem. Godsey falsely creates a dichotomy between doctrine and devotion and opts for the latter to the exclusion of the former. Biblical Christianity, however, is both doctrinal and devotional. Doctrine without devotion is a foundation without a house. Devotion without doctrine is a house without a foundation. Both are absolutely necessary.

Healthy Christian theology will be devotional because it will include not only confession but also reflection and cultivation of life. Each of these three elements has a place in the study of doctrine. The seventeenth century Puritans were prodigious writers of theological works which combined these elements in a wonderfully balanced fashion. It is a tragedy that someone did not introduce Godsey early in his pilgrimage to the spiritual goldmine of Puritan literature. Perhaps if he had drunk from refreshing springs of devotional theology which is faithful to God's Word he would not have become intoxicated with postmodern heresy.

Is this judgment too harsh? Many think that it is. Judge for yourself. In the interest of being just in providing an accurate assessment of his views, several lengthy quotes are provided. In addition to disdaining doctrinal Christianity, Godsey takes the following faith-destroying positions:

He denies the exclusivity of Christ as God's saving revelation.

Christians seem to become remarkably troubled about whether Jesus is humankind's only savior. Is Jesus God's only word? The simple answer is "Of course not." But beyond a simple answer, the issue is largely a mistaken one. There are no right answers to wrong questions....For me as a Christian, Jesus is the defining revelation. This confession that lies at the center of my faith does not require an exclusivist position whereby I should feel compelled to deny every other person's claim to know God. I can say only that, for me, Jesus is the central event of history. I cannot speak for another (p. 133; cf. p. 119).

He rejects the Bible's infallibility.

The Bible is complete. Revelation is not. To ascribe infallibility to the written words of the Bible is wrong (p. 51; [so much for no wrong answers!]).

He denies Scripture's final authority in the Christian faith.

Our reason to believe reaches beyond the boundaries of the Bible. In all likelihood, the authority for our faith should not rest upon the Bible alone, or even primarily....The simple identification of the Word of God with the Bible is a grave mistake. Far from being the principal focus of our faith, the Bible is the record of God's revelation and how people responded and interacted with God's presence in their history....The Bible, then, should not be viewed as a boundary of belief (p. 50). When it comes to defining the foundations for belief, we need to be very careful about requiring infallible sources. The health of religion does not depend on infallible sources. The errors of religion spring over and over again from claiming too much for a single source of truth. The study of Christian history shows us claiming too much for the church or too much for the Bible or too much for our own experience with God. Genuine belief listens to all of these sources. Each can be reliable. On the other hand, the elevation of any of them to the status of final authority inevitably leads to error and conflicts (pp. 47-48).

He believes that God lives within everyone.

God lives within us--within everyone of us (p. 68; [this could presumably refer exclusively to Christians, but, as the following quote shows, it does not]). God is spirit, and describing God as spirit means that all of nature, and every person in nature, bears the presence of God (p. 70).

The Incarnation is God's ultimate affirmation of Adam. It conveys powerfully that we are all of God. Each of us is God incarnate. Each of us bears God's presence. We are God's words in the world.

He affirms the essential goodness of all people.

The notion that "God created" also gives us a new assessment of human character. That we are born of God provides the foundation for affirming that people are essentially good....Our creation by God means that the essence of our being is good....At the wellspring of their life, people are good even when they do evil (p. 83).

He denies the omnipotence of God.

The notion that God is the all powerful, the high and mighty principal of heaven and earth should be laid aside....God does not abolish evil and suffering because God cannot abolish evil and suffering [think of what this does to our hope of heaven!]. "Cannot" may seem like a difficult word to use when we speak about God, but it is a word that we must have the courage to say if we speak honestly about God's suffering (p. 99).

He denies the full deity of Jesus.

The deity of Christ can never be more than a confession of faith, and it shall never be less (p. 121).

We are like the wandering Israelites [who "longed for a golden calf that they could cherish"]. Jesus is our word. Like Israel, our first temptation is to make Jesus into an icon of devotion. We want to see God, touch God, clutch God, and make sure that God belongs to us. So, we make Jesus into an object of worship. Let us not make Jesus into a magic fetish. Jesus is God's speaking to us. Jesus is not God. Jesus is the Word of God. Jesus is the speaking of God (p. 128).

He rejects the substitutionary atonement of Christ.

This notion of substitutionary atonement leaves us with the irony that God's chief concern seems to be to keep the books balanced. Over against one side of the ledger that records our sin must be another side that says the penalties have been paid. The books must be balanced. This theory, again, gives us a picture of God that looks more like a judgmental tyrant. It winds up making God responsible for Jesus' death. God is a God who must get even (p. 141).

Atonement is not something that God has done for us in the sense that God has made Jesus take our place so that the books would be balanced. Atonement is something God does within us (p. 142).

He teaches universalism.

Jesus did not come to tell us how to be saved. Jesus came to tell us that we are saved (p. 144).

Jesus came to say that we are saved. We are forgiven. God's forgiveness lies within us. We are loved. God's embracing love lies buried within us underneath a load of guilt and fear. No conditions, no prerequisites, no plans to follow--grace is not a conditional affirmation (p. 145).

God's word of grace is that we are free. The announcement comes. Jesus himself is the announcement. Everyone who has lived in this awful state of being trapped has been set free (p. 155).

Universalism has a very high view of God. God's grace and God's love are the ultimate realities revealed in Jesus (p. 202).

More examples could be given, but by now, surely, you get the picture. Let's be honest, this book advocates heresy. As grievous as it is to see the President of a Southern Baptist University (the one that bears the name of Jesse Mercer, no less!) enmeshed in such heretical snares, there is an even greater tragedy found within the whole "Godsey affair." More alarming than the book itself are some of the responses which it has provoked from various Southern Baptist pastors and leaders.

Comments from the "moderate camp" are rather predictable though nonetheless grievous. Cecil Staton, president and publisher of Smyth and Helwys said, "The only crime Godsey can be accused of is openly and honestly sharing his personal faith while encouraging others to do the same. The only thing he is guilty of is being a Baptist in the historic sense of the word." Can a person who denies Christian essentials while maintaining Baptist distinctives really be a Baptist? Not historically. This creature is a modern invention. Staton could not be more wrong. In the historic sense, Godsey has left not only Baptist life but the Christian faith. At best, those who deny salvific truths while clinging to baptistic practices are neo-Baptists.

Hardy Clemons, former moderator of the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, wonders "why someone would accuse Dr. Godsey of having a low Christology." My guess is that it has something to do with his denial of the deity and redemptive exclusivity of Christ. Even theological liberals should recognize this.

Several who have rendered public opinion on Godsey's book--including some who openly admit that it teaches universalism--have expressed fear that Baptists might "overreact." Just what kind of reaction to universalism (to keep

the argument focused on only one of Godsey's multiple heresies) would be "over" for an evangelical Christian? Surely a call to burn all universalists at the stake would be an "overreaction." Torquemada is no role model. But what about New Testament church discipline? And if this does not effectively correct and restore the erring advocate of universalism, then what about removal from leadership and a public repudiation of his views?

Universalism and denial of the deity of Christ are soul-destroying errors. But they are no worse than the legalism which first-century Judaizers propagated. Yet, Paul called these false teachers "dogs" and "evil workers" (Philip. 3:2). Further, he expressed his strongest imprecation on them in Gal. 5:12. Even the apostle of love warns that anyone who does not "abide in the doctrine of Christ" is not to be greeted as a brother (3 John 9-11). Is this overreaction? No! Not when the very gospel of Jesus Christ is at stake. Rather, watchmen should sound the alarm. The danger should be identified in simple and plain language. God's people--as well as the false teachers themselves--must be warned in no uncertain terms.

Fortunately, there have been a few who have renounced Godsey's book in just such language. Far more, however, have spoken of it as if it were simply a minor mishap or an unfortunate blemish on an otherwise stellar Christian academic career that should not unduly alarm Southern Baptists.

One Georgia Baptist leader disavowed Godsey's theology and ventured that "most Georgia Baptists would be uncomfortable with such positions as his belief in universalism." Bad table manners might make one uncomfortable. A Southern Baptist University President who is a universalist ought to make those who have invested their trust and resources in him feel something a little stronger than this. Perhaps grief, sorrow, betrayal, and righteous indignation would be appropriate--but definitely something more than discomfort.

Amazingly, discomfort may be too strong a word to use in describing the response of the Mercer University's Board of Trustees. The Georgia Baptist executive committee and state convention passed a resolution censuring Godsey's views and calling on the Mercer trustees to deal with his book. They responded by affirming Godsey as "a Christian, as a Baptist, and as an able and effective leader" of the university. Further, they responded that "the views of President Godsey do not exceed the boundaries of academic independence in a Baptist university." If this is true then someone has moved the boundaries.

Jesse Mercer, the principal founder for whom the school was named, warned against the very thing which the current president has done. In 1839, while editor of the *Christian Index*, he published the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith in installments. He introduced this project with the following explanation:

The Baptists as a denomination, have always regarded the Bible as being amply sufficient for all the purposes of faith and practice. But knowing that many persons, holding wild and visionary notions upon religious subjects, often use the same language, and say that they too make the Bible their standard; and knowing that their views and practices are often misunderstood and often misrepresented, our brethren have felt it important to get up certain briefs, or compends of their faith, so that their adoption of the Bible in general terms, might not seem to be a sort of shield for heterodox [not to mention, heretical] opinions, and that there might be a oneness of doctrine and practice among themselves.

I think Jesse Mercer and his Baptist contemporaries would have felt something more than a little discomfort over one of their leaders openly advocating universalism and denying Christ's deity. It is a sad commentary on how far we have degenerated theologically when current trustees of a Baptist university affirm these teachings by their president in the name of academic freedom. These things point to the sobering reality that today, as in Isaiah's day, "truth is fallen in the street" (Isa. 59:14). Truth has been relativized and theology has been marginalized. It is in just such an

environment that heresy both disappears and thrives. It disappears not because it has been eliminated, but because it has become invisible. It is no longer seen. Like carbon monoxide, it murders its victims without their ever knowing it. For that very reason, soul-destroying heresy will continue to permeate its environs until it is detected.

So when we talk about heresy, let's be honest. The refusal to acknowledge its existence and to renounce it in clear terms is a denial of the faith once delivered to the saints. Genuine confession of faith always consists of both an affirmation of saving truth and a denial of that which opposes saving truth. Thus in Galatians 1 Paul not only commends the gospel which he had preached and which his readers had received, but he also renounces any other gospel and pronounces anathema on anyone who would dare to preach another gospel. Even if we shudder to announce it, this apostolic curse remains in place.

Though I deeply regret and stridently deplore much of what he says, I sincerely appreciate Godsey's honesty and integrity in his talk about God. We need a similar kind of honesty in talking about heresy. The Christian faith does have doctrinal boundaries. They are fixed and eternal. As Thomas Oden has suggested, the great task of Christian theology in the twenty-first century will be rediscovering them. When we talk about God, there are indeed some wrong answers. They need to be exposed--not in the spirit of a theological pugilist, but with pastoral concern and conviction. And where they contradict the clear teaching of Scripture on points of salvific importance, they need to be renounced in the strongest of terms--even to the point of using the dreaded "h" word. Otherwise, truth really does not matter at all.



Look out for those three ruffians, Wild-Head, Inconsiderate and Pragmatic--

A Lesson From Bunyan On Truth's Friends and Foes

Ernest Reisinger

All true Christians are lovers of the truth. They desire to fellowship in the truth; they desire to be taught the truth and they want to be dispensers of the truth. The Bible tells us that men perish "because they receive not the love of the truth that they might be saved" (2 Thess. 2:10). Christians follow in a line of many men and women who sealed their testimony for truth with their blood.

It is my heart's desire to encourage everyone to seek diligently after truth and to defend it--to be valiant for truth and to seek to dispense it by life, lip and good sound literature. However, some dangers accompany all those who would be valiant for the truth.

The prophet Jeremiah faithfully reproved sin and threatened God's judgment for sin (Jer. 8-9). As he rejoiced neither at iniquity nor calamity, he bitterly lamented the people's sin and God's judgment, expressing great grief for the miseries of Judah and Jerusalem. He justified God in the greatness of the destruction brought upon them, and called on others to bewail the woeful cause of Judah and Jerusalem.

The great prophet showed the people the vanity and folly of trusting in their own strength, wisdom, privileges of their circumstances or anything but God alone. But the people were not "valiant for the truth" (Jer. 9:3). They were filthy adulterers; they were false, unfaithful to God and one another. They bent their tongues like their bows for lies, and their tongues were fitted for lying as a bow is bent for shooting arrows, turning as naturally to lying as a bow to the bowstring.

They did not defend God's truth, which was delivered to them by the prophets. They had no courage to stand by an honest cause which has truth on its side--if greatness and power be on the other side. Those who will be faithful to the truth must be valiant for it, undaunted by opposition. But the truth had fallen in the land, and the people could not lend a hand to help it up.

"And judgment is turned away backward, and justice standeth afar off: for truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter. Yea, truth faileth; and he that departeth from evil maketh himself a prey: and the Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no judgment" (Isa. 59:1-15). Men will answer not only for their enmity in opposing truth but also for cowardice in defending it.

To point out the dangers that accompany the defense of truth, I refer to Mr. Valiant-for-Truth, a character from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, my favorite book next to the Bible. In John Bunyan's metaphor can be found some heart lessons.

Mr. Valiant-for-Truth was "born in Dark-land" and his mother and father are still there. Dark-land was on the same coast as the City of Destruction. Valiant found Dark-land unsuitable and unprofitable and thus he forsook it. He gave these reasons for leaving:

"We had one Mr. Tell-Truth come into our parts, and he told about what Christian had done. How he had left the City of Destruction to head for the Celestial City. That man so told the story of Christian and his travels that my heart fell into a burning haste to be gone after him, nor could my father and mother keep me, so, I got from them, and am come thus far on my way."

The great lesson which Bunyan would have us learn from his impressive character, Valiant-for-Truth, comes from the terrible fight Valiant had with three ruffians who attacked him all at once and almost put an end to him.

Valiant--his name tells us he was a contender for the truth. He had the truth. The truth was put into his keeping. He was a custodian of the truth. He was bound to defend the truth. He was thrown into a life of controversy and knew all the terrible temptations which accompany such a life. One old saint said, "Temptations in a life of controversy are worse than the temptations of whoredom and sin."

Bunyan called the three enemies who attacked Valiant by these names: Wild-Head, Inconsiderate and Pragmatic. In his wisdom, John Bunyan is warning every defender of the truth, in religion or in other matters, of the besetting temptations to be wild-headed, inconsiderate, and officious, opinionated, dictatorial and intolerably arrogant.

Now, this bloody battle--and a bloody battle it was indeed--was not fought at the mouth of any dark lane in the midnight city. This terrible, bloody battle was fought in Valiant's own heart.

Bunyan's Valiant was not one of these smooth, double-tongued, calculating, supposed friends of the truth. He did not wait until he saw truth walking in silver slippers before he identified with it. He was not a church politician. No, no.

Let a man lay a finger on the truth or wag a tongue against the truth, and he would surely have to settle it with Valiant. His love for truth was a passion. The fierceness of his love for the truth frightened ordinary men, even when they were on his side. Valiant could have died for truth without a murmur.

But Valiant had to learn a hard and cruel lesson: Although he thought he was the best friend of truth, in reality at the same time he was a great enemy of the truth. He had to learn that although he meant to defend the truth he had indeed done it harm. The truth is often heard to say, "Save me from my friends." We have all seen examples of this and most of us have experienced it.

We have seen *Wild-Head* in operation many times. Sometimes with his pen in hand. Sometimes behind the pulpit. Sometimes in private conversations or debate. We have seen him rush at the character of some saint who was just not enlightened, whose understanding was not as good as his Christian experience. Will Wild-Head never learn that truth apart from the Spirit will not develop Christian character? Grace and truth must be together. Mercy and truth must be together as they are in Jesus.

In this awful, confused and divided Church today we need great care, wisdom and charity in applying the truth as we have come to see and love it. I mean applying it as to time, manner and method.

What is one safeguard at this point? Not putting asunder what God has joined together. Mercy and truth, Psalm 85:10, 86:15, 89:14; Proverbs 14:22, 16:6, 20:28. Kindness and truth, and truth and love, Ephesians 4:15--"speak the truth in love." Grace and truth, John 1:14, 17--"Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. Yes, He was full of "grace and truth." One great safeguard, therefore, is not putting asunder what God has joined together.

The second ruffian or rogue who attacked Valiant was *Inconsiderate*. Now remember, these enemies were in his own heart. Inconsiderate never thinks and certainly doesn't pray before he speaks--nor after he has spoken. He never puts himself in another man's place. He has neither the head nor the heart to put himself in another man's place.

Matthew Henry commented on this from a passage in Job 19:2, 5: "Those who speak too much seldom think they have said enough; and when the mouth is open in passion, the ear is shut to reason." Inconsiderate seems to forget that all truth must be revealed." For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why doest thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" (1 Cor. 4:7).

Truth must be revealed to the heart by the Spirit in Christian growth, even as it was at conversion. We must remember that in the eyes of other Christians we differ from them as they differ from us.

May the Spirit help us to see with their eyes and feel with their hearts and sympathize with their principles--yes, and with their prejudices. I did not say compromise but sympathize, and agonize a little more in prayer for the Spirit to teach their hearts. Every Valiant must beware of that ruffian in his heart called Inconsiderate. Bunyan was a champion for God's truth, and he suffered for the truth.

The third ruffian who attacked Valiant was *Pragmatic*. This word had a different meaning then from what it has today. In 1616 pragmatic meant "officiously busy in other people's affairs; interfering, meddling," and in 1638 it meant "opinionated, dictatorial, dogmatic" (*Oxford Dictionary*).

It is the picture of someone always setting everyone right on every little point. There is nothing he will not correct in you. He forgets that truth does not stand on points but principles. The truth does not dwell in the letter but in the Spirit. Truth is not only given to set others straight; truth, like charity, begins at home.

Truth suffers in the hands of a wild-headed, inconsiderate and pragmatic man who is never satisfied, never pleased, never thankful, always setting his superiors right. This kind of man, intending to be a friend of the truth, is an enemy of the truth.

Bunyan, by warning us of these enemies within, does not mean to discourage us from being Valiant-for-Truth. It is only to point out the enemy. We know he wishes to encourage us rather than discourage us from the rest of the metaphor.

Let me emphasize that Bunyan points out these enemies, whom we face in our battles for truth, not to discourage us but to encourage us in our warfare. To make us good soldiers of Jesus Christ.

The first time we see Valiant he is standing at the mouth of a place Bunyan calls "dead man's lane." He is standing there with his sword in his hand and his face all covered with blood. His words are, "'They have left upon me, as you see,' said the bleeding man, 'some of the marks of their valor and have also carried away with them some of mine.'"

I believe, in like manner, we see Paul with the blood of Barnabas still upon him as he wrote 1 Corinthians 13. Or can you not see John, with the blood of the Samaritans still on him, in old age, when he wrote his first epistle, especially 3:10-19, 4:7-12? Where do you suppose I got the key to this veiled metaphor of Bunyan's Valiant-for-Truth? The key does not hang on the outside doorpost of my experience but rather on the wall of my own place of repentance.

How many times have you trespassed against humility, love, with unadvised sermons and conversations? While

whirling words, yes, and without shame and remorse or self-condemnation? None of these passages of Paul or John or Bunyan were ever written without remorse and self-contempt. And may I add they are not rightly read without a little of the same feeling.

Now, let me take you further with Bunyan for encouragement in being Valiant-for-Truth. "Then said Mr. Great-Heart to Mr. Valiant-for-Truth, `Thou has worthily behaved thyself; let me see thy sword.'" Valiant shows him his sword. "When he had taken it in his hand and looked thereon awhile the guide said, `Ha, it is a right Jerusalem blade!'"

"It is so," said Valiant. "Let a man have one of these blades with a hand to wield it, and skill to use it and he may venture upon angels with it. Its edges will never blunt--it will cut flesh, bones, soul, spirit and all" (Heb. 4:12).

This is the wonderful blade we have in our hands. This sword--and a sword it is (Eph. 6:17)--was not forged in an earthly fire nor whetted to its unapproachable sharpness on an earthly whetstone. And best of all, when a good soldier of Jesus Christ has this sword girt on his thigh he is able to go against himself with it, against his own worst enemy as in Bunyan's metaphor: his own wild-headedness and pride of heart, against his own lack of consideration. Great-Heart the guide, "Thou has done well . . . Thou has resisted unto blood, striving against sin. Thou shalt abide with us, come in and go out with us, for we are thy companions."

This Jerusalem blade is a two-edged sword. Like the Arabian warriors who used their swords as a mirror to dress themselves for battle, every Valiant-for-Truth must look in his sword to see thoughts and intents, the joints and marrow of his own disordered soul. Yes, it has two edges, one to slay error in others but also one to slay evil in himself.

The last lesson from Bunyan's Mr. Valiant-for-Truth is one of great encouragement, and I pray that it will encourage all of us to be not only lovers of truth but also to be Valiant-for-Truth.

It is a picture drawn from Christiana, the widow of Christian. It is a vivid picture indeed, because it is the last time she sees Valiant-for-Truth on this side of that river that has no bridges. Just let me review the first time she saw him. His own mother would not have known him! He was hacked to pieces with the swords of his three enemies, Wild-Head, Inconsiderate and Pragmatic. But as the blood was washed off the mangled man's head, face and hands, she saw beneath the bloody wounds a true, brave and generous-hearted soldier of the cross.

The heart is always the man. She had lived long enough to know that. And in spite of all the scars, behind the scars was his love for the truth that had put him in all those bloody battles. She could never forget how, when she was introduced to Valiant, he exclaimed. He almost embraced her as his own mother when he burst out with his eyes full of blood. "Why, is this Christian's wife? . . . What, and going on pilgrimages too? It gladdens my heart!"

"Good man (speaking of Christian). How joyful will he be when he shall see Christiana and his children enter after him at the gates into the Celestial City." Valiant was not too busy to salute an old woman in the way. And she could see in him all the manly beauty of a young soldier. It gladdened her heart to hear him as it did his heart to hear her.

Their parting shows the place of all the Valiants-for-Truth in Bunyan's characters. At the river, when the post had come for her, we see the widow. She sets aside all her companions, even Mr. Great-Heart the guide, to leave her children under Valiant's sword and shield. Her words to Valiant are, "I would also entreat you to have an eye to my children."

How do we get along with those who are Christians yet hold some different views about the atonement or the application of the atonement? J. C. Ryle, John Brown, Richard Baxter and John Owen had different views. Many Christians are Arminians. *How* do we get along with them?

Bringing together Valiant-for-Truth, Christian charity, Christian unity and having a proper catholic spirit is the difficult part. How? How is always before us.

We cannot lend support nor sympathy to any error. We cannot countenance it or we will be betraying our Lord. There are always those easy-minded people who are ready to blink at error as long as it is committed by some clever or good-natured brother, one of those mush-mouthed men who have so many fine points about them.

At times we must put a fresh bolt on the door of truth. And at all times we must beware of sailing under the flag of peace and friendship in cooperation with God's servants when in reality we are robbing the God of truth.

The best way to promote unity is to promote truth. We will not be a friend of truth by yielding to each other's mistakes and errors. We are to love each other in Christ, but we are not to be so united that we are unable to see each other's faults and errors. And especially so united that we do not see our own faults.

We must keep our priorities in proper order. For example, on some truths no true Christians disagree: the deity of Christ, the trinity, the necessity of conversion, and so on.

Our attitude, actions and words about those Christians who differ with us should be Christian--Paul's attitude. "Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will: The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds: But the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defense of the gospel. What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretense, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice" (Phil 1:15-18).

Paul did not intimate that he could join them. The Lord will accomplish His purpose. We must not deny the sovereignty of God in our attitude, actions or words about those who differ with us.

This is not to suggest that God blesses error; He is the God of Truth. He blesses the truth though it sometimes is mingled with the error.

We find ourselves in a perplexing situation at this present time. All true Christians desire to be catholic in their sympathies, gracious and generous in their relationship with other Christians. But there are some things we cannot accept. Because we have good feeling towards them and even thank God for what He is doing through them does not mean that we can join them in all that they do or teach. God forbid. This would be love at the expense of truth. This is not true love but false unity.

We must carefully, humbly and with great love and understanding point out why we cannot join them or cooperate with them. We often find ourselves with those of different backgrounds different Churches, different stages of doctrinal understanding. The question we should keep in our minds is this: "Who maketh me to differ from another and what have I gotten that I have not received?" (1 Cor. 4:7).

Be seekers after truth. Be lovers of the truth. Defenders of the truth--Valiant-for-Truth. Dispensers of the truth by life, lip and literature. Be mindful of the enemies from within as well as the enemies from without, especially Wild-

Head, Inconsiderate and Pragmatic.

I would like to add another to Bunyan's list, spiritual pride. Jonathan Edwards, speaking on revival along with other things, mentions the danger of spiritual pride: "This is the main door by which the devil comes into the hearts of those who are zealous for the advancement of truth. It is the chief inlet of smoke from the bottomless pit to darken the mind and mislead the judgment."



Letters

Dear Dr. Ascol:

Keep up the good work! As a retired pastor and college teacher, I have felt denominationally homeless for some time even though I was a lifelong Southern Baptist. During the recent quarrels, the minority factions seemed divided between those who felt there was no problem and wanted things unchanged and those who wanted to go further in the direction of an anthropocentric theology that could blend in with a popular culture that glorifies self-realization, self-fulfillment and self-esteem. I was also disappointed in the majority faction who realized something was wrong but sought a solution in the shallow fundamentalism of American popular religious culture. I firmly believe that a sound hermeneutics cannot rest on novel words replacing the grand truths of revelation, inspiration, and illumination. If the renewal of Biblical authority is not founded squarely on the doctrine of special election and we try to demystify the process, the result will scarcely be worth the effort. We must reaffirm that in addition to the election to enter the kingdom, there is also an election to a special function in the kingdom's work; and for that work, the individual is uniquely prepared, including the inspired writers and those who proclaim the message.

I have already said too much. Thank you for your time. I discovered your offer of a free copy of the journal on-line and asked for it. Thank you.

Yours in Christ,
C.E.
Phelan, CA

Dear Friends,

Thank you so much for the free literature you recently sent me. I received your packet in today's mail.

I am deeply grateful for the good stand you are taking on the Doctrines of Grace. The *Founders Journal* has been used of the Lord to bring me to a clearer understanding of Biblical Soteriology. I am confident that it is helping many others also.

Keep up the good work!

J. K.
Roanoke, VA

Dear Dr. Ascol:

...I have been a believer in the Doctrines of Grace for about twenty-five years and have preached them for nearly thirteen years. Generally, my ministry has been in small country churches because I am Bi-Vocational.

I have read most of what is contained in the journal and it is encouraging to know that others understand the great doctrines we believe. Ministering in a Southern Baptist Church, no matter how small, is somewhat disconcerting since most of my colleagues are Arminian and the material from our Convention just reinforces the Arminian error.

It is sometimes difficult to understand why church members vehemently refuse to believe the Scripture with regard to grace. How do you explain the phenomenon of seemingly good people who have been church members for years who have never come to know the doctrines of grace? These good people often react negatively when grace in its purest form is preached. Why do good church members resist honoring God in all of His saving majesty? Why do you suppose God has allowed the Arminian error to have gained such wide acceptance? Why are there so few who believe in true grace?

These are questions, along with many others, that I often ponder. Perhaps the journal can provide more insight into some of them. It will be a pleasure to receive future issues and to have contact with like-minded believers.

M. L.
Eastman, GA

Dr. Ascol,

Your on-line magazine is Christian excitement and scholarship at its best. A friend at work showed me your web page and together we have been devouring everything written.

I intend to attend the 1997 Founders meeting in St. Louis; I hope to thank you there in person. Right now I could tell you how excited and consumed I am by the pure Gospel message that your magazine represents, but I think I would never finish if I started. For, you see, I lived a dead Baptist life for 6 years, even attending a Baptist University, before God saved me. All at once He gave me a love for Scripture; something I had beforehand never known. He then sent an old-fashioned revival to my workplace. He then placed me in a God-fearing church led by one of the greatest men I know, David Baker (First Baptist church of Belton, Missouri, a.k.a. Heartland Baptist Tabernacle.) Now I am happy to exclaim that I will be Baptized as a believer this Sunday night. I could go on, but I better stop here; for I am getting started and, like I said, I may not be able to stop.

I write to tell you that if it were not for your web page I might not have discovered the depth of this great Biblical surge in our convention. Don't misunderstand, Pastor Baker more than keeps us well informed--I just wanted you to know that your on-line presence fills in some gaps; and it finally gives the Internet purpose. I now see that God is using this pornographic mess of an Internet in spite of itself. I realize that other excellent authentic Christian web pages do exist, such as R. C. Sproul's, but yours has content and focus that I find in no other. I will be telling my friends--though most will think you have the sharpest, rockiest and most disagreeable web page they have yet to surf upon: some might even be mortally crushed by its waves. But hey, what are friends for?

S.R.
via email

Dear Dr. Ascol,

As a proud graduate of Southern Seminary when Dr. Honeycutt was there, I didn't know whether to puke or barf on your trite comments about the events at Southern Seminary. I have come to the realization that individuals such as yourself are too sick to even have a normal discussion with.

I was there when Roy Honeycutt stretched out his hand to work with trustees over the situation at Southern and when the trustees at Southwestern forced Russell Dilday out, and there is one consistency about fascists such as yourself, and that is you lie, distort, cheat, or commit any atrocious act in the name of God in order to fulfill your sick perverted lust for power.

And as for the moderates being broken, I would like to direct you to my article in the HUMANIST magazine of Oct./Nov, due out in about two weeks, as the retort of a young moderate Southern Baptist theologian concerning the true agenda of power-hungry fascists such as yourself. You will find the moderate movement far from dead.

Sincerely yours,
S.W.

Editor's Response

Dear Mr. W.:

May I recommend that you take a couple of aspirins and lie down for a while? Such outbursts as that which you directed to me in your email can't be good for your blood pressure.

Thanks for caring enough to write.

*In Christ,
Tom*



Doctrinal Preaching

Timothy George

[This article was taken from *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, Michael Duduit, Editor, Broadman Press: Nashville, TN, pp. 93-102.]

In a handbook such as this which features models of *contemporary* preaching, it is not at all obvious that there should be a chapter on doctrinal preaching. Expository preaching, creative preaching, evangelistic preaching, incarnational preaching, narrative preaching, yes; but *doctrinal* preaching? The very word *doctrine*, like its cousins *dogma* and *dogmatic*, has fallen on hard times. For many people it connotes authoritarianism, intellectualism, and legalism. When applied to preaching it comes out rigid and stultifying rather than dynamic and edifying.

Yet despite those misconceptions, the recovery of doctrinal preaching is essential to the renewal of the church. The crisis of identity which engulfs contemporary Christianity, especially in the West, has resulted in large measure from the loss of a persuasive message clearly proclaimed in the power of the Holy Spirit. What does the church have to say that no one else can say?^[1] What does the preacher have to say that the psychologist, politician, stock broker, or social commentator has not already said with more passion and insight than most pastors can muster even on Easter Sunday? The credibility of the church's proclamation will not be restored by acquiring new communication skills or devising better sermonic forms, as helpful as these may be. The answer is a preacher in whom the Word of God burns as a fire in his bones, one who must speak because he cannot keep silent, one who preaches with fierce humility ("Who is equal to such a task?" 2 Cor. 2:16, NIV) yet also with unstinted audacity ("Such confidence...is ours through Christ," 2 Cor. 3:4, NIV) in the certain knowledge that God Himself is speaking in the faithful proclamation of His Word. Or, as Second Helvetic Confession (1566) put it even more succinctly: "The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God."^[2] This is the burden of doctrinal preaching.

The strategy of this essay is first to examine the presupposition of doctrinal preaching, then to give practical suggestions as to how this approach might affect the craft of the sermon, and finally to present several examples of doctrinal preaching from the history of the church.

The Message Is the Medium

Without a doubt the most influential theologian between the Reformation and the twentieth century was Friedrich Schleiermacher, who died the same year that Charles H. Spurgeon was born (1834). While working out of the Reformed tradition, Schleiermacher defined religion not in terms of the doctrinal concerns of historic Christianity but rather a "feeling of absolute dependence." This principle enabled him to recast traditional Christian doctrines in terms of the relative God--or Christ-consciousness of the believer. Thus in his major theological work, *The Christian Faith*, he relegated the doctrine of the Trinity to a slight appendage at the end since it seemed to him to have little relevance to the religious experience or actual life-situation of the individual Christian.^[3]

Schleiermacher was a preacher as well as a theologian. His homiletical theory provided a new paradigm for preaching in the modern world. According to this understanding, the preacher dares to step forward and address the congregation only in order "to project his innermost self as a subject of shared observation." His purpose is "to lead them to the sphere of religion, where they feel at home so that he can instill his [own] sacred feelings."^[4] The emphasis is not on the content of the message, which may be quite irrelevant, but on the authenticity and self-expression of the messenger whose "inspired speech" gives concrete form to the religious sensitivities of the congregation. In this scheme the preacher is a divine *virtuoso*, a spiritual *guru*, whose role is to tap the innate yearnings and inner quests of his hearers. To this way of defining the preaching task, one can only ask with Karl Barth: "Where is the Word of God in this immanent sea of feelings? Where is the ongoing seeking if all that is done is simply the expression of an inner possessing?"^[5]

Against the modern, subjectivistic understanding of preaching stands the earlier Reformation model of preaching as the central sacramental moment of worship. According to Luther: "The Preaching and teaching of God's Word is the main part of all divine service."^[6] The German word for worship, *Gottesdienst*, is a double entendre: it means not only our response to God in adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and praise, but also--and in the first instance--God's service to us, the Word of God addressed to us in law and gospel, promise and fulfillment, judgment and grace. For this reason we who have been called and appointed to preach have no business regaling the congregation with "our own prophetic booming," however eloquently expressed or aesthetically framed such booming may be. Our vocation is that of the postman: we have been entrusted with a message which has to be delivered. As John H. Leith has put it: "The message is in a real sense the medium, and the worst heresy in preaching is for the medium to become the message."^[7]

If anything, Zwingli and Calvin stressed even more rigorously than Luther this uni-directional doctrine of preaching. In October, 1523, Zwingli addressed the ministers of Zurich on the true nature of ministry. He declared that the false shepherd or pastor was one who put forth his own ideas rather than teaching the "certainty and clarity" of Holy Scripture. The Reformation had been introduced in Zurich on January 1, 1519, when Zwingli entered the pulpit of the Great Minister and began a series of expository sermons through the Gospel of Matthew, discarding the "canned Homilies" provided by the church authorities. In 1525 he began "The Prophecy," a regular seminar on preaching which met in the cathedral choir, in order to train Reformed ministers, presumably "true shepherds," in biblical exegesis and doctrinal theology.

Calvin carried this emphasis further still by insisting that when the Bible is purely preached, it is as if God Himself were speaking in person. Richard Stauffer has claimed that preaching for Calvin was not merely an essential task of the church and preacher but also an occasion for divine epiphany.^[8] It is the work of the Holy Spirit and not the personality or skill of the preacher which produces such an occasion of transcendence. As we sing: "All is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down...Pray...while we try to preach." Thus true ministers of the divine Word--Calvin's preferred term for set-apart preachers--are to "invent nothing themselves, nor teach whatever they please, but faithfully transmit [only] what God has committed to them."^[9]

The presupposition of doctrinal preaching is that the God who has once and for all come in Jesus Christ and once and for all spoken in Holy Scripture still comes and still speaks to His people through the faithful proclamation of His Word in the power of the Holy Spirit. "Doctrine" is not an abstract formulation of belief divorced from this saving reality and divine revelation. To the contrary, it is the irreducible content of this very reality, conveyed through God's authoritative, infallible Word and elucidated through what the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of that Holy Word.

Preaching Doctrinally

What has been said thus far concerning the presupposition of doctrinal preaching could well apply in a general sense to the entire task of preaching in the life of the church. We must now examine more concretely how these principles are applied in the art of sermon construction.

It is unfortunate that "doctrine" and "Bible" are frequently pitted against each other as polar opposites between which the hapless preacher must choose. This dichotomy reflects a long-standing tension on theological faculties between biblical scholars on the one hand and systematic theologians on the other. Such turf wars may have their place in the obscure guilds of academic life, but they are disastrous in the pulpit. Every doctrinal sermon must be contextually rooted in sound exegesis; and every expository or biblical sermon should place a given passage in the widest theological framework possible. Both the unity and the historicity of the Bible demand no less.

Building on the insights of the Reformation, the English Puritans developed a pattern of preaching which was both biblically based and theologically responsible. Reacting against the "bare reading ministry" prescribed by statute and the rhetorical ornamentation practiced by many Anglican divines, the Puritans sought to cultivate a "plain style" of preaching,

a style which focused on the message rather than the messengers who, as Calvin had warned, "must not make a parade of rhetoric, only to gain esteem for themselves ...the spirit of God ought to sound forth by their voice, so as to work with mighty energy...or doctrine is cold unless it is given divine efficacy."[\[10\]](#)

One of the principal handbooks on preaching in the Puritan tradition was William Perkins's *The Arte of Prophesying* (1592). In this pithy treatise of eleven brief chapters Perkins summed up his homiletical methodology in four basic rules:

The order and sum of the sacred and only method of preaching

1. To read the text distinctly out of the canonical Scriptures.
2. To give the sense and understanding of it being read, by the Scripture itself.
3. To collect a few and profitable points of doctrine out of the natural sense.
4. To apply, if we have the gift, the doctrines rightly collected to the life and manners of men in a simple plain speech.

The sum of the sum:
Preach on Christ by Christ to the praise of Christ.
Soli Deo Gloria[\[11\]](#)

True preaching thus requires the measured reading of Holy Scripture and its proper interpretation, followed by doctrinal exposition and pertinent application. Concerning the third step, doctrinal exposition, Perkins distinguished those texts which are freighted with doctrinal meaning (for instance, Rom. 3:9-26) from other texts where the doctrine is implied rather than expressed in an obvious manner. In the case of the former, the preacher's task is like that of a weaver unloosing a braid; in the latter case the preacher must compare Scripture with Scripture in order to properly place a particular text within the *scopus* of the entire drama of redemption. Such "collections," as Perkins called this latter exercise, are to be soundly gathered and derived from the genuine and proper meaning of the Scriptures. They are not to be forced upon the text by the fancy of the preacher. Still, it is necessary and proper to "rightly divide the Word" in this sense because the Bible is not a hodgepodge of literary texts from the ancient world but rather the perfect record of God's dealings with humankind in creation and redemption, inspired and given definitive canonical shape by the Holy Spirit.

The sermon is not complete until the fourth step of application has been taken. The purpose of preaching is never merely to dispense information or to display the erudition of the preacher. Perkins was critical of sermons that were too "garnished with skill of arts, tongues and variety of reading."[\[12\]](#) The sermon is not a seminar! The preacher must apply the doctrine rightly collected from the text in such a way that its spiritual impact is felt by the hearers. In order to do this effectively, the preacher must be as good an exegete of the congregation as he is of the text. He will know how to reprove the wayward, comfort the disconsolate, rebuke the obstinate, encourage the disheartened, and extend the invitation of grace to the unsaved.

While the pattern of doctrinal preaching developed by the Puritans can still be used with great profit, it is not necessary to follow their precise order of presentation. All sermons should have a strong doctrinal content, but there are many special occasions and preaching opportunities which lend themselves to a particular doctrinal emphasis. The following suggestions may be helpful in planning a schedule of preaching throughout the year.

1. Use confessions and catechisms to give a framework for doctrinal sermons. Some preachers, including even renowned evangelical ones, have been reluctant to follow this method. They prefer the sermon to arise directly from the Bible and not from human formulations, not even very good ones.[\[13\]](#) However, it need not be either/or. After all, confessions and catechisms are derived from the Bible. They have no independent authority apart from the Bible, and they must always be tested by, and stand revisable in the light of, the Bible. They are deeply anchored in the history of particular faith communities and can be a useful device for passing on the faith intact to the next generation.

2. Preach on the grand events of salvation history throughout the church year. In Jesus Christ, God has redeemed not only individuals and the cosmos but also time itself. Christians celebrate this fact throughout the year by ordering their lives and worship around the events of Jesus' advent, birth, baptism, death, resurrection, ascension, and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Preaching with the aid of a lectionary will bring these themes into focus for sermon preparation.

3. Prepare for the celebration of baptism and the Lord's Supper by sound doctrinal preaching. One of the great themes of the Reformation was the coherence of Word and sacrament. The "visible words" of God in bread, wine, and water should always be accompanied by thorough instruction. Such sermons need not be restricted to the administration of the ordinances. A message on the unity of the church would be especially appropriate for the Lord's Supper, just as the theme of discipleship would comport with the meaning of baptism.

4. Use great hymns of the faith to accent the theological content of the sermon. In the absence of consistent doctrinal preaching, hymns have often been the primary carriers of Christian meaning for many believers. They are best used, however, in concert with sound theological exposition. Who could not preach on the grace of God after singing Charles Wesley's "And Can It Be?" or on forgiveness after "Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven?"

5. Show the importance of doctrine in the lives of great biblical and church historical characters. Doctrine has both a propositional and an incarnational dimension. It is the truth of God's Word distilled and applied to fallen and redeemed human beings, but it is that truth lived out in the flesh and blood reality of the people of God. To show how Athanasius staked his life on the doctrine of the Trinity, or how Luther struggled against the fury of hell for the doctrine of justification by faith, is to impress on the congregation the gravity and relevance of the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

Three Examples

In conclusion, we want to look briefly at three examples of doctrinal sermons from the history of the church. Each comes from a different period of church history--Patristic, Reformation, Modern. Each represents a distinctive point of departure in preaching: the first is a sermon on the Apostles' Creed; the second, a sermon taken from the routine of an expository series; and the third, a thematic approach to a great doctrinal topic. All three, however, follow in varying measures the essential elements of the fourfold pattern outlined above.

The first sermon was preached by Saint Augustine to new Christians preparing for baptism. It is entitled, "On the Creed: A Sermon to the Catechumens." Augustine encouraged his hearers to receive, believe, and confess their faith in the words of the Rule of Faith, what he called the Apostles' Creed. This statement, he argued, is indeed a summary of the principal teaching of the Bible itself. "These words which ye have heard are in the Divine Scriptures scattered up and down: but thence gathered and reduced into one, that the memory of slow persons might not be distressed; that every person may be able to say, able to hold, what he believes."[\[14\]](#)

The biblical basis of each phrase of the creed is explicated. Special attention is given to the relation of the Son to the Father. Disputes over the Trinity were still troubling the church in Augustine's day, and he clearly affirmed the equality and co-eternality of the Father and the Son. "Hold ye therefore boldly, firmly, faithfully, that the Begotten of God the Father is what Himself is, Almighty."[\[15\]](#) He also discouraged those young believers from prying too inquisitively into the hidden things of God. Concerning Christ's ascension and session at the right hand of the Father, he admonished: "And let not your heart say to you, What is he doing? Do not want to seek what is not permitted to find: He is there; it suffices you."[\[16\]](#)

By treating the entire Apostles' Creed in one brief sermon, Augustine passed lightly over many deep truths of the faith. His purpose was to ground the catechumen under his charge in the essentials of the gospel. He sought to apply these truths by pointing out their relevance to daily Christian living: "He shewed us in the cross what we ought to endure, He shewed in

the resurrection what we have to hope." [17] By using the framework of the Rule of Faith, Augustine was able to present a comprehensive statement of Christian theology within the confines of a single sermon.

Our second example, Calvin's "Sermon on the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ," is a more focused message based on a specific text, Matthew 26:36-39. Calvin presented a masterful interpretation of this passage which records the Gethsemane experience of Christ. Calvin claimed that the Scripture intends to confront us with three truths in this event: first, God's inestimable love toward us; second, our detestable sinfulness; and, third, that we should value the salvation won for us by Christ so dearly that we will forsake the world and find our true joy in the inheritance acquired for us at so great a price.

Calvin emphasized the voluntary character of Christ's suffering and the empathy produced by His ordeal. "For if he had not felt in his person the fears, the doubts, and the torments which we endure, he would not be so inclined to be pitiful toward us as he is." [18] Calvin also pointed out that Christ's fears were not merely confined to the physical agony, but stemmed from His experience of the eternal death and damnation which He endured as our substitute. "For even if there be only a single sinner, what would the wrath of God be?" [19] Calvin was careful to affirm both the full deity and true humanity of Christ in this most vulnerable moment of His incarnate life.

What is the purpose of rehearsing this event in the life of Jesus Christ? Calvin made a threefold application in this sermon. First, the contemplation of the sufferings of Christ should reorient us more fully to the things of God. In the second place, Calvin preached this sermon as a preparation for the celebration of the Lord's Supper which was to take place on the following Sunday in Geneva. Finally, the good news of Christ's suffering and atonement should inspire us to encourage one another and reach out to the lost. "Let us not grow weary in the middle of the journey, but let us profit so much day by day, and let us take trouble to approach those who are out of the road, let this be all our joy, our life, our glory and contentment, and let us so help one another until God has fully gathered us to himself." [20]

Our third example is a sermon on "The Perseverance of the Saints," delivered by Charles H. Spurgeon on June 24, 1877. Spurgeon did not believe that a preacher should ever plan a series of sermons in advance. Instead, he felt that the Spirit would guide the preacher to the appropriate text for each occasion. His text for this sermon was Job 17:9: "The righteous also shall hold on his way." Spurgeon declared: "I take our text as accurately setting forth the doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints." [21]

The sermon is divided into three parts: introduction, the proof of the doctrine, and its practical application. Since this particular doctrine had been hotly debated in the Calvinist-Arminian disputes, Spurgeon's presentation had a slight polemical tone, although he stayed close to the scriptural arguments and never indulged personal slurs or partisan remarks. He set forth seven arguments on behalf of the doctrine: the nature of regeneration, Christ's expressed teachings, the intercession of Jesus, the character and work of Christ, the covenant of grace, the faithfulness of God, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Having marshaled his evidence in an impressive manner, Spurgeon turned to the impact of this doctrine for the life of faith. He found first that it is a great encouragement for those who are on the way to heaven. The divine assurance of a successful finish keeps the pilgrim on the road in the most trying of circumstances.

One might hardly undertake a difficult journey if he did not believe that he would finish it, but the sweet assurance that we shall reach our home makes us pluck up courage. The weather is wet, rainy, blusterous, but we must keep on, for the end is sure. The road is very rough, and runs up hill and down dale; we pant for breath, and our limbs are aching; but as we shall get to our journey's end we push on. We are ready to creep into some cottage and lie down to die of weariness, saying, "I shall never accomplish my task" but the confidence which we have received sets us on our feet, and off we go again. [22]

In addition, Spurgeon declared, this doctrine is an enticement to sinners who are seeking salvation. "I am happy to preach to you a sure and everlasting salvation....Grasp at it, poor soul; thou mayest have it if thou dost but believe in Jesus Christ,

or, in other words, trust thy soul with him."[\[23\]](#)

Of the three examples cited here, Calvin's sermon comes closest to fulfilling the requirements of the Puritan model. Augustine's sermon is strong on doctrinal content but weak in its exegetical basis. Spurgeon's sermon is thoroughly interlaced with Scriptural exposition but only related tangentially to his primary text. All three preachers took pains to apply doctrinal truth to the lives of their hearers. All three dealt with major concerns of the faith, not with obscure points of doctrine. Each preacher--Augustine, Calvin, and Spurgeon--spoke powerfully to his generation out of a core of conviction. Each desired to declare the whole counsel of God because each knew something decisive was at stake every time a minister of the divine Word stands to declare: "Thus saith the Lord."

The rich treasury of doctrinal sermons in the history of the church can help us to recover an endangered genre of preaching in our own generation. If our sermons are to be more than "cozy chats on small matters," we must apply ourselves to this challenge with all of the gravity and gladness of our souls.[\[24\]](#)



¹See John H. Leith, *The Reformed Imperative: What the Church Has to Say That No One Else Can Say* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989). See also the chapter on preaching in Leith's *From Generation to Generation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), and his "Calvin's Doctrine of the Proclamation of the Word and Its Significance for Today," *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 206-229.

²John H. Leith, *Creeeds of the Churches* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 131.

³Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) 2:738-751

⁴Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 151. For a more positive appraisal of Schleiermacher, see B. A. Gerrish, *A Prince of the Church: Schleiermacher and the Beginnings of Modern Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

⁵Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 22-23.

⁶*D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 58 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1833), 19:78.

⁷Leith, *From Generation to Generation*, 95.

⁸Richard Stauffer, "Le discours à la première personne dans les sermons de Calvin," *Regards contemporains sur Jean Calvin* (Paris, 1965). Quoted in Leith, "Calvin's Doctrine," 211.

⁹Comm. Jer. 1:9-10. See William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 226.

¹⁰John Calvin, *Letters of John Calvin*, ed. Jules Bonnet (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858) 2:190-191; Comm. John 17:1.

¹¹Ian Breward, ed., *The Works of William Perkins* (Appleford: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1970), 349.

¹²*Ibid.*, 327.

¹³See, for example, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 187.

¹⁴Philip Schaff, ed., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 3:369.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 370.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 373.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 372.

¹⁸John Calvin, *Sermons on the Saving Work of Christ*, tr. Leroy Nixon (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950), 53.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 60.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 65.

²¹Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Sermons on Sovereignty* (Pasadena, Texas: Pilgrim Publication, 1990), 202.

²²*Ibid.*, 212.

²³*Ibid.*, 213.

²⁴Merrill R. Abbey, *Living Doctrine in a Vital Pulpit* (New York: Abingdon, 1964), 3. For a recent statement of this challenge, see John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990).



¹See John H. Leith, *The Reformed Imperative: What the Church Has to Say That No One Else Can Say* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989). See also the chapter on preaching in Leith's *From Generation to Generation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), and his "Calvin's Doctrine of the Proclamation of the Word and Its Significance for Today," *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 206-229.

²John H. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 131.

³Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) 2:738-751

⁴Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 151. For a more positive appraisal of Schleiermacher, see B. A. Gerrish, *A Prince of the Church: Schleiermacher and the Beginnings of Modern Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

⁵Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 22-23.

⁶*D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 58 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1833), 19:78.

⁷Leith, *From Generation to Generation*, 95.

⁸Richard Stauffer, "Le discours à la première personne dans les sermons de Calvin," *Regards contemporains sur Jean Calvin* (Paris, 1965). Quoted in Leith, "Calvin's Doctrine," 211.

⁹Comm. Jer. 1:9-10. See William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 226.

¹⁰John Calvin, *Letters of John Calvin*, ed. Jules Bonnet (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858) 2:190-191; Comm. John 17:1.

¹¹Ian Breward, ed., *The Works of William Perkins* (Appleford: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1970), 349.

¹²*Ibid.*, 327.

¹³See, for example, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 187.

¹⁴Philip Schaff, ed., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 3:369.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 370.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 373.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 372.

¹⁸John Calvin, *Sermons on the Saving Work of Christ*, tr. Leroy Nixon (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950), 53.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 60.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 65.

²¹Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Sermons on Sovereignty* (Pasadena, Texas: Pilgrim Publication, 1990), 202.

²²*Ibid.*, 212.

²³*Ibid.*, 213.

²⁴Merrill R. Abbey, *Living Doctrine in a Vital Pulpit* (New York: Abingdon, 1964), 3. For a recent statement of this challenge, see John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990).



Confessions of Faith in Baptist History

Roger Nicole

Timothy. Good afternoon, Uncle Regor!

Regor. Good afternoon, Timothy. What's new at Faith Baptist Church?

Timothy. The pastor said this morning that Baptists are not a creedal people. Uncle Regor, what's a creed?

Regor. A creed (derived from the Latin *credo*, I believe) is a statement-sometimes short, sometimes fairly lengthy-in which an individual, a church, or a denomination expresses its views on important issues by direct affirmations and /or sometimes by express rejection of positions deemed erroneous.

Timothy. Are there other words than creed to signify the same thing?

Regor. O yes, there are quite a few equivalent expressions: confession of faith, articles of faith, declaration, statement of faith, articles of religion, and yet others.

Timothy. Are there significant differences between these terms?

Regor. No, they are really equivalent expressions.

Timothy. Why would people formulate their faith in that way?

Regor. To educate those within and to inform those outside the association.

Timothy. Is that not what is called "catechisms"?

Regor. Yes, catechisms are statements of faith, usually presented in the form of questions and answers, in a way that even children could understand.

Timothy. So why did the pastor say that Baptists are not a creedal people?

Regor. Apparently because he does not know very well the history of Baptist people.

Timothy. Do you mean to say that Baptist people and churches have written creeds?

Regor. Yes, this is precisely what I mean. Let us go to my study and I'll show you evidence of that.

(They go together to Regor Elocin's study.)

Timothy. Oh! How many books you have, Uncle Regor! Have you read them all?

Regor. No, of course not! If I need something, I have the books at hand, so I don't need to read them as I would books that I borrow and must return. But I am aware of the nature of their contents.

Timothy. What is this big book?

Regor. It is a very valuable work reproducing the text of more than 246 documents reflecting significant moments in the history of the Baptist movement. It was prepared by Dr. H. Leon McBeth, is titled *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, and was published in 1990 by Broadman Press in Nashville, the official press of the Southern Baptists.

Now this volume contains the text of more than 20 statements of faith by Baptists as well as arguments brought up in the discussion of many points of doctrine or of policy. This book makes it clear that Baptists throughout their history acknowledged the supremacy of Scripture over any human statements such as confessions of faith. This is true as well for other religious bodies that do explicitly endorse the authority of some creeds and/or catechisms, which they consider "subordinate standards." It may be that recognition by Baptists of the subordinate nature of human creeds (e.g. on p. 375) has led some like your pastor to deny the legitimacy of articles of faith. but this is a confusion.

Timothy. Uncle Regor, do you have other books like this one that contain Baptist formulations of faith?

Regor. Yes indeed! Take this volume published in 1854 by Edward B. Underhill, *Confessions of Faith and Other Public Documents Illustrative of the History of Baptist Churches of England in the 17th Century* (London: Haddon Brother, 1854) xvi., 360 pp.

This volume contains the text of 6 Baptist confessions (1611, 1646, 1656, 1660, 1678 and 1688) and of a Baptist Catechism of 1693. Unfortunately, it is not easy to find a copy, but fortunately these texts have been reprinted in two more recent volumes, with the exception of the confession of 1646 that is reproduced in its 1644 form, and of the catechism of 1693.

Timothy. Do you have these two volumes?

Regor. Yes, Timothy. Here is W. J. McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* printed in 1911 by the American Baptist Publication Society (xii, 368 pp.). This volume has an English translation of 6 Anabaptist and one Mennonite statements It mentions 5 additional Mennonite statements up to 1632. English Arminian Baptists (General Baptists) are represented by the text of 7 confessions, one of which is titled "The Orthodox Creed," and 3 others named but not reproduced. The English Calvinistic Baptists produced 4 confessions reprinted here, while mention is made of 4 private confessions. On the American scene 2 confessions are given in full and some differences between the second London confession (1677) and the Philadelphia Confession (1742) are noted. The book closes with an English translation of 3 confessions, respectively German, French and Swedish, and takes note of still others not reproduced. No catechism is included in this volume.

Timothy. What about the other volume?

Regor. Here it is. William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1959. 420 pp.). This volume reproduces all the confessions printed in McGlothlin with the exception of 3 short Anabaptist statements and of the German Confession. It includes a number of declarations not found in the other books. Altogether the text of 39 statements is given and reference is made to more than 12 other formulations. No catechism is included. Fortunately, this volume is still in print.

Timothy. What is the paperback volume next to Lumpkin?

Regor. This is a nice recent work (1982) on *Baptists in Europe: History and Confessions of Faith* (Nashville: Broadman Press. 300 pp.) by G. Keith Parker. This volume discusses the use of a confessional principle throughout Europe and gives an English translation of some 22 European Baptist documents and of 3 others not peculiar to the Baptists. It is well indexed.

Timothy. For a so-called "creedless people" this seems a rather abundant harvest!

Regor. This only the tip of the iceberg, Timothy. While it is true that no single statement of faith rallied the universality of Baptists, Parker was quite right when he wrote,

From their birth in the context of sixteenth-century English separatism . . . and throughout their history . . . many Baptist churches, associations, and eventually, national unions have sought to express this faith in some form of confession . . . They have been used for apologetic, polemical, and educational purposes . . . In some cases, they were also used for discipline or to deal with heresy (Parker, *op.cit.* pp. 18, 19).

Timothy. Could you give me some examples of Baptist leaders who prepared or endorsed some creeds, Uncle Regor?

Regor. This would be very easy for it was a common practice from the very start. John Smyth, the initiator of the Baptist movement in Great Britain wrote a confession of 20 articles (1609)[1] and signed another one in 38 articles (1610).[2] A still larger document of 100 articles appeared after his death (1612).[3]

John Smyth's close companion, Thomas Helwys, who separated from him when Smyth approximated too closely to the Mennonites, wrote a 27 article declaration of faith.[4]

John Clarke, "a baptist of the completest and purest type,"[5] founder of the First Baptist Church of Newport, RI. which deserves "the first place as regards the consistent and persistent devotion of its leaders to Baptist principles . . .,"[6] left a confession of faith in writing.[7]

John Bunyan,[8] Benjamin Keach,[9] John Gill,[10] C. H. Spurgeon[11] wrote and circulated their confessions of faith.

Timothy. Spurgeon? That's a fish, Uncle Regor.

Regor. No, you must be thinking of "Sturgeon," but C. H. Spurgeon was one of the most effective preachers of all time. His Metropolitan Tabernacle, seating 5000, was filled twice every Sunday. His influence during this lifetime was incalculable and it continues to this day.

Timothy. Okay for individuals, but did Baptist churches actually adopt a confession of faith?

Regor. Yes indeed. Baptist churches have often expressed their faith in confessions that were a part of their charter. We should note, for instance, that the First Baptist Church of Boston, MA, in the very year in which it was organized, presented their confession of faith to the judiciary in September 1665. A facsimile of this confession may be found in the scholarly work of N. E. Wood, *The History of the First Baptist Church of Boston, 1665-1899*. This can be found opposite page 65, and a transcript on pp. 65, 66. I want to show it to you. [He shows this text to Timothy.] The pastor, Nathan E. Wood, expresses his hearty agreement and rejoices that "there has been no wavering and no wandering from the creedal statement put forth in 1665" (p. 348).

Timothy. That is an eloquent witness, but it is only one church. Do we have evidence that many Baptist churches framed such confessions?

Regor. This is a good question, and a long time ago (1944) I attempted to ascertain what the situation was in the Baptist churches of Massachusetts. For this purpose I borrowed all the copies of constitutions and by-laws on file at the office of the Massachusetts Baptist Convention in Boston. These documents did not necessarily reproduce articles of faith, even if

adopted by the church, but some of them did.

Timothy. What did you find out?

Regor. In 1944 there were 337 churches in the Massachusetts Baptist Convention. Only 110 of these had some document on file. 28 had published their articles of faith in their constitution. 4 more declared allegiance to the New Hampshire Confession of Faith. 12 made reference to their articles of faith, although these were not reproduced in their printed constitution. 15 more restricted membership to those who adhered to the views of faith of the church, or to Baptist principles or yet to "outstanding Baptist truths." 51 churches did not exhibit or allude to a specific doctrinal position. One of these, that I knew well, had a confession of faith.

The net result of this investigation was that more than 54% of the churches covered had an affirmation of faith in their polity. Of course, 237 churches were not included simply because they had not filed a copy of their constitution at the Mass Baptist Convention, but I know of no good reason that would lead us to think that their inclusion would reduce the percentage, and a further exploration of the 51 churches which had no mention of their articles might well lead to the discovery that some, perhaps many, actually had such, and this would raise the percentage.

Timothy. This is interesting because Massachusetts is not in the Bible belt, and is often thought of as a state rather oriented toward liberal views!

Regor. In the Philadelphia area one small group known as the Quaker Baptists published a Confession of Faith in 1697, while the main body requested their pastor, the Rev. Mr. Watts, "to prepare a Catechism and Confession of Faith." These were published in 1700. Dr. W. R. McNutt, an anti-creedal Baptist, wrote ". . . the Baptist churches have quite uniformly adopted each its confession of faith . . . in contents they are in fact quite creedal."[\[12\]](#)

Timothy. Are there examples where groups of Baptist churches have accepted jointly a common formula as an expression of their faith?

Regor. Yes there are many such examples, Timothy. Most of the documents reproduced in Underwood, McGlothlin, Lumpkin, and Parker are of this type. They are often signed by people who were members of various local churches, but who were conscious of understanding rightly what their church believed both in terms of assent, the basis for the unity of the local body, and of dissent, the reason for refraining from remaining in or joining other denominations.

Timothy. But this may violate the principle of the independence of the local church by imposing on it a statement drawn by outsiders!

Regor. Not in the least, Timothy, because no statement was imposed on any church. If a church did not approve of a statement, or even a portion of it, it retained the right of dissent going perhaps to the point of withdrawal. Likewise the association retained the right to give brotherly admonition to a church deemed heretical or disorderly, even to the point of withdrawing fellowship from it.

Timothy. Are there confessions that had a far reaching acceptance across associational lines or even state boundaries?

Regor. Surely. *The Philadelphia Confession of Faith* endorsed in 1742 by the Philadelphia Baptist Association has for long possessed and still today possesses a wide range of influence. It follows step by step the great *Second London Confession of Faith* without being bound to a scrupulous identity in wording.

The New Hampshire Declaration of Faith (1833) is a statement that gained heavy endorsement by Calvinistic Baptist churches when the Free Will Baptist churches had their start with *Treatise on the Faith of the Freewill Baptists* (1834).

The well-known "Baptist Faith and Message" adopted in 1925 and carefully revised and reinforced in 1963 has had great currency in the South and is mandatory for teaching service in 4 of the 6 seminaries of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Timothy. Is this approach exclusively Southern Baptist or are there other Baptist colleges and seminaries that have adopted a statement of faith?

Regor. Indeed there are. Many Baptist schools are functioning under articles of faith, published in every catalog and often subscribed to every year by every trustee, administrative officer and faculty member.^[13] The footnote names 27 such schools about which I could document the presence of such a confession. Further research would undoubtedly uncover many more cases, particularly among the older institutions that were established at a time when Baptists were not swayed by the myth that they are "anti-creedal in polity."^[14] The number would also increase if we included institutions not restricted to Baptists, but that had, from the start of their existence, an important Baptist influence and faculty members (e.g. Gordon-Conwell, Anderson-Newton, Trinity Evangelical, Fuller, etc.).

Timothy. How is it then that so many institutions have deviated from their original foundation so clearly articulating an evangelical stance?

Regor. There is an ethical issue here. At the start it is likely that some people who have a general agreement with the statement slide lightly over some specific detail or details in which they disagree, sometimes by virtue of some far-fetched interpretation of the wording which fairly obviously is at variance with the original intent. For example, some people aver that "He was born of the virgin Mary" in the Apostles' Creed was intended to safeguard the sinlessness of Christ and not a birth from a physical virgin!!

Timothy. But, Uncle Regor, this is not only a violation of the creed, it runs counter to the historical statements of both Matthew and Luke in their gospels!

Regor. Precisely, and this encourages a cavalier attitude toward the scripture as well as toward the statement of faith. In the passage of time a feeling is generated that the signing does not imply real agreement. People who believe in the solemn sincerity of a signature or an oath are duped.

Sometimes an institution reclaims a measure of credibility by reworking its standards to accommodate them better to the level of its actual beliefs, thus regaining a type of integrity at the expense of its foundation! But this is only a temporary improvement, for it is likely, if the principle of loose adherence prevails, that after some fifty years another reassessment will be needed. The significance of a confession as a standard of faith does not go further than the personal integrity of those who sign it. Therefore, permanent vigilance is imperative in the church and in the seminary.

Those who advocate "anti-creedalism" as the historic position of the Baptists should provide an explanation for Alexander Campbell's (1788-1866) relationship to them. He was indeed anti-creedal, holding that "human creeds as bonds of union and communion are necessarily heretical and schismatical."^[15] He lists the "Baptist confession of faith in all its varieties"^[16] as the kind of document he opposes. If the Baptists were indeed in principle opposed to creeds, it would surely be counterproductive to list them as opponents rather than supporters. It would also be foolish for Baptists to oppose Campbell on this score as controversialists like the Southern Baptist J. B. Jeter did. Alexander Campbell may have been wrong, but he was not stupid! Incidentally, his view on this matter did not precipitate a great reunion among true Christians, nor did it preclude some significant schisms among the "Disciples of Christ," the name by which his followers were known.

Timothy. Uncle Regor, why are some Baptists of our time so greatly opposed to creeds?

Regor. If you want my opinion on this matter, I would suggest that in many cases they do not feel in agreement with some

of the existing confessions, and rather than to make an open demurral, they deem it more expedient to oppose creeds in general rather than specific positions affirmed therein. Consciously or unconsciously this provides an umbrella for their dissent.

Timothy. The pastor said that such use is a violation of the fundamental Baptist principle of the religious freedom of every individual. What does that mean?

Regor. This statement by the pastor represents a drastic and most regrettable confusion. Baptists of all types have traditionally and rightly insisted on the principle that the state ought not to interfere with the religious convictions and practice of anyone, unless they be manifestly subversive of the public order. The Baptists had their start in regions where there was an "established" church and where the principle "*cujus regio, ejus religio*" [the citizens should adopt the religion of the one who governs] was widely invoked. Baptists were in strong protest against this idea and insisted that religious convictions and practice were an *individual* matter and should be decided by individual choice without pressure, let alone coercion on the part of the state. This ran counter to the practice of the established church in England and Scotland as well as to the congregational public order in Massachusetts. They were precursors to the great work of Alexander Vinet (1797-1847) in his volume, *On the Manifestation of Religious Convictions* (1842).

That membership in good standing in any church, let alone a Baptist Church, should be available to anyone irrespectively of convictions or conduct was an idea wholly foreign to them, and in fact should be to anyone who calls himself/herself a *Baptist*. This was made very clear indeed in Roger Williams' well-known simile of a ship at sea, on which would be found "both Papists and Protestants, Jews and Turks." All of these should have the right to set up and attend their own worship undisturbed. The same freedom, Roger Williams insisted, should be available in the State as on that ship. It would be a veritable travesty of his thought to imagine that he would advocate the right of Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims to be received as members of a Baptist church while maintaining their original religious faith and practice. Any Baptist Church that permits such a course ought to be immediately disfellowshipped as heretical and disorderly. Any church has the right to establish criteria for membership. Freedom of the individual means that anyone is free to apply for membership or to stay away. It does not and could not mean that anyone has a right to insist on membership irrespectively of whether he/she accepts or rejects the conditions established by the body.

Two well-established historical facts confirm this rather obvious conclusion.

1. It is clear that Baptists have regularly contended for the separation of church and state. If Baptist membership were totally indiscriminate it would be co-extensive with the state and separation would provide no benefits.
2. It is also clear that for a long time Baptists insisted on close communion, that is they would not serve communion to those who had not been baptized by immersion in profession of their faith. How much less would they grant membership to those who did not satisfy this requirement?

Individuals outside the church are free to apply to join or to remain outside. If they apply to join it should not be a surprise that the church has certain standards of faith and conduct with which agreement is to be expected. Freedom to be inside while differing in fundamentals has never been, is not now, and should never be a Baptist tenet. It is a tenet of extreme liberalism which invariably leads to the disintegration of the church.

Timothy. Are there other arguments alleged against the use of creeds in the Baptist churches?

Regor. Yes. Non-creedal Baptists often urge that the acceptance of a confession of faith violates the independence of the local church.

Timothy. This, if true, would be a weighty argument, for the church polity of independence is clearly an important tenet for Baptists.

Regor. It would be true if a congregation were ordered to accept a common confession by any external authority, ecclesiastical or secular. But this is not the case. Every Baptist congregation has the right to establish its own standard of faith and many Baptist churches have done precisely that. A church has also the right to adopt a confession already in existence or prepared by others. This has been the case for the Philadelphia Confession, the New Hampshire Confession, and the Baptist Faith and Message. These have been freely endorsed by many churches, sometimes in addition to their own statement. There is nothing in that procedure that violates the independence of the local church. If they were coerced in so doing, that would be an infraction! If anyone not a member of the church stated that a Baptist church had no right to set up a confession of faith, that would also be a violation.

If churches with a similar faith decide to unite into an association, that is their privilege, and it does not interfere with their independence as long as each local church retains the right to withdraw from the association, and the association the right to expel a church or churches whose faith and/or practice are deemed inadequate to sustain fellowship with the body.

Timothy. Is it possible that some confessions of faith may usurp the place of the Scripture as the supreme authority and the court of appeal by which the soundness of an individual or a church may be judged?

Regor. Such an argument is often advanced, not only among Baptists but also in churches in which a creedal basis is acknowledged in the constitution of the denomination.

Timothy. Is there strength in this argument?

Regor. Undoubtedly there are people and churches who have exaggerated the authority of creeds to the point that a direct appeal to Scripture has been hampered. But this is not an inevitable course when the church is sound. The creeds and confessions of faith have been called and are recognized as "subordinate standards." They function as a public expression of the way in which a person or a church understands the Scripture. An appeal to Scripture itself is always allowable. The creeds, as a human expression of the marrow of biblical teaching, are subject to amendments (additions, modifications or excisions) under a methodology articulated in the church order. Since people often disagree as to the interpretation of Scripture, it is beneficial for individuals and for churches to articulate in what sense they understand the Word of God. To prohibit them because some people abuse them could be compared to a policy to renounce the use of knives because some people are using them as weapons to do mischief!

Timothy. Should we have creeds merely because it appears that those who favor them are not thereby violating Baptist tradition?

Regor. No, we should have them because we deem that they can be useful now, and we are happy to show that their presence is not a breach of Baptist practice. Tradition, like the creeds, must always be tested by Scripture. If a tradition is not mandated by the Bible, it may be discarded if this appears expedient. Those who oppose confessions of faith on the ground that their use is not in keeping with the traditional Baptist faith are not only wrong in fact, they are also inconsistent in that they do not show close adherence to certain other historically authenticated Baptist traditions such as immersion as prerequisite for church membership, close communion, the practice of laying on of hands after baptism, etc. Such disregard of Baptist traditions weakens the argument against creeds on the alleged ground that they violate Baptist tradition.

Timothy. I see what you mean, Uncle Regor; "People who live in glass houses should not throw stones!"

Regor. Yes Timothy, this may be called the "boomerang effect."

Opponents of creeds frequently contend that they precipitate and exacerbate divisions within the church by focusing on controversial points that could otherwise remain unnoticed. This may at times be the case, and wise and spiritual people

should guard against this danger (1 Tim. 1:4; 6:4; 2 Tim. 2:14, 23, 24; Titus 3:9). The major source of divisions, however, is not in creeds: people like the "Disciples of Christ" who have no creeds have not been able to avoid them. The problem is usually the deviancy of certain members, ministers and/or denominational officials, or again the stubborn insistence of some who insist on the acceptance by all of certain peripheral opinions on which differences could be indulged (such as the insistence on charismatic gifts, or again the opposition to them). The Church must protect itself against doctrinal deviancy. There are more than 130 verses in the New Testament that articulate this principle.[\[17\]](#) The Church must safeguard the good deposit: more than 20 passages make this clear.[\[18\]](#) Creeds are often means to that end; not infallible means, to be sure, but profitable nevertheless. They are often skillfully crafted statements that combine truths that some thought incompatible. They provide helpful fences that prevent hazardous and one-sided speculations that lead into abysses. Sometimes they are memorable monuments to the struggles through which the Christian truth has prevailed over insidious errors.

Error and indifference endanger the life of the church, not creeds!

Timothy. The pastor said that creeds have a petrifying influence that hinders the wholesome development and expansion of Christian doctrine.

Regor. Creeds are not meant to be a final expression of the totality of Christian truth, beyond which no one may go; rather they are an initial formulation on points already established in the minds of those who sign them; they point in the direction where true progress may be achieved. The creed of Nicea (325) did not paralyze the labors of Chalcedon (451).

The articles of faith in a creed may be compared to buoys in a river or in the vicinity of a haven. The ship must pass between the buoys in order to avoid shoals or sandbars. The pilot who takes account of this does not thereby surrender the freedom of navigation: he/she simply takes advantage of this disclosure of data secured by diligent study and experience. Articles of faith similarly define for the believers a safe passage in places where others in the history of the church have encountered havoc and even shipwreck. How unwise a pilot would be judged who chose to disregard buoys in order to assert freedom. One who rejects the propriety of confessions of faith falls under the same condemnation.

Timothy. Uncle Regor, how did those who opposed the use of creeds fare in the Baptist Conventions of the United States?

Regor. In the Southern Baptist Convention a fairly detailed statement of faith, "The Baptist Faith and Message," was accepted in 1925 and enlarged in 1963. Its authority was carefully distinguished from that of Scripture.

In the Northern Baptist Convention, much more influenced by liberalism, the anti-creedal Baptists scored an important victory in the adoption by a vote of 1264 against 637 in the annual meeting in Indianapolis (1922) of a motion by Cornelius Woelfkin that "the Northern Baptist Convention affirms that the New Testament is the all-sufficient ground of our faith and practice, and we need no other statement."[\[19\]](#)

Timothy. That is surely clear enough, and it appears to spell a disassociation with the traditional Baptist position that you have outlined and documented in our conversation.

Regor. That indeed and furthermore estrangement from the immense majority of the Christian churches that defined their faith in a confessional manner and made assent to them conditional to admission for full membership.

But there are more grievous defects still. In the first place, the motion is in conflict with the authority that it acknowledges, for the New Testament gives us many examples of statements of faith of creedal nature:[\[20\]](#)

The Confession of Peter	Matt. 16:16; John 6:68
The Confession of Thomas	John 20:28
The baptismal formula	Matt 28:19
One God and one Lord	1 Cor. 8:6
Christ's humiliation and exaltation	Phil. 2:5-11
The Mystery of Godliness	1 Tim. 3:16
The Elementary Articles	Heb. 6:1,2
The Saving Confession	Rom. 10:9, 10
The Lordship of Christ	1 Cor. 12:3

How could anyone claim to follow the New Testament practice and deny the legitimacy of creedal statements that the New Testament exemplifies?

Timothy. I see your point, Uncle Regor, and this motion does not do justice to the authority of the Old Testament, that is also the Word of God!

Regor. Exactly, Timothy, it is a catastrophic mistake to separate the Old Testament from the New. It is a gratuitous insult to the Old Testament to fail to include it in the "ground of faith." The New Testament is not a substitute for the Old; it is the necessary supplement and capstone of the Old Testament revelation.

Furthermore, the authority of the Old Testament is directly and repeatedly affirmed in the New Testament and from the lips of Jesus Himself (Matt. 5:17-19; John 10:35; etc.). Thus the motion by its limitation sets itself as a direct violation of the very authority it claims to recognize.

Timothy. These are pretty damaging criticisms, Uncle Regor! Is there anything else that should be said.

Regor. Yes, there is. The motion is self-contradictory: the text of it is not found anywhere in the New Testament and so it turns out to be precisely one of the those "other statements" which it claims are not needed!! It cuts the ground from under its own feet, and thus it should not have been made; and being made, it should not have been approved; and being approved, it could not be enforced, except by a violation of the Baptist principle of the independence of each local church; and this independence, although perfectly consistent with the view of creedal Baptists, remains the major premise on which the anti-creedal Baptists are wont to build their case!!

Timothy. Well, Uncle Regor, you have proved to me that this motion is not only heretical, but it is also stupid. Thus there were at least 1264 Baptist delegates in Indianapolis who endorsed a stupid motion.

Regor. Yes, Timothy, and very intelligent people sometimes do very stupid things. The mere fact of being a Baptist does not provide complete assurance that one will always act wisely. Remember also that there were 637 delegates, no less Baptist than the others, who had the good sense to reject the motion.

The V-day, Victory-day, of anti-creedalists turns out to be a D-day, Disaster-day.

Timothy. You know Uncle, Regor, I just thought of something! if someone says: "I don't believe in creeds," or "We Baptists have no creeds," that is a creedal statement already, so it is self-contradictory!!

Regor. Exactly, just like square circle or giant dwarf! It is historically false and logically untenable. So, E. Y. Mullins, a strong Southern Baptist, said:

"Creeds are the natural and normal expression of the religious life."[\[21\]](#)

and Paul Scherer, a rather broad-minded Lutheran wrote:

"Any religion that boasts of being creedless is either misrepresenting the facts or writing its own epitaph."[\[22\]](#)

Timothy. It is getting late. I had better return home. Thank you for this very instructive session, Uncle Regor.

Regor. In typical Southern Baptist fashion, let me close with an invitation: "What are you going to do about it?"

Timothy. What do you mean, Uncle Regor?

Regor. Why don't you memorize the Nicene Creed and rejoin the church universal as a credal Baptist?

Timothy. O.K. I'll do that. Goodbye, dear uncle.



¹W. J. McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*. Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1911. p. 54. Text in W. L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*. Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1959. pp. 100f.

²W. J. McGlothlin, *ibid.* Text. pp. 54-65. Lumpkin, *op.cit.* pp. 102-113.

³W. J. McGlothlin, *op.cit.* P. 66. Text. Pp 66-84. W. L. Lumpkin, *op.cit.* Pp. 124-142.

⁴W. J. McGlothlin, *op.cit.* P. 84. Text. Pp 85-92. W. L. Lumpkin, *op.cit.* Pp. 116-123.

⁵A. H. Newman, *History of the Baptist Churches in the United States*. New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1898. p. 108.

⁶A. H. Newman, *op.cit.* P. 96.

⁷Isaac Backus, *A History of New England with Particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians called Baptists*. 2d edition, 2 vols. with notes by David Weston. Newton, Mass.: Published by the Isaac Backus Society, 1871. II, 182-184.

⁸John Bunyan, *The Whole Works of John Bunyan*. 3 vols. Ed. George Offer. London: Blackie and Son, 1862. II, 594-601.

⁹W. J. McGlothlin, *op.cit.* Pp. 289, 290. W. L. Lumpkin, *op.cit.* Pp. 239, 240, 348.

¹⁰John Gill, *Collection of Sermons and Tracts*. 3 vols. London: George Keith, 1778. III, 626-631. W. J. McGlothlin, *op.cit.* P. 290.

¹¹Cf. Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon*. London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1966. P. 218.

¹²W. R. McNutt, *Policy and Practice in Baptist Churches*. Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1959. P. 107.

¹³Atlantic Baptist College, Moncton, New Brunswick; Baptist Bible Seminary, Clark Summit, PA; Bethel Theological Seminary, St. Paul, MN; California Baptist Theological Seminary, Los Angeles, CA; Central Baptist T. S., Kansas City, KS; Central Baptist T. S., Toronto, Ontario; Central Baptist T. S., Minneapolis, MN; Conservative Baptist T. S., Denver, CO; Eastern Baptist T. S., Philadelphia, PA; Freewill Baptist College and Seminary, Nashville, TN; Golden Gate Baptist T. S., San Francisco, CA; Grand Rapids Baptist T. S., Grand Rapids, MI; Liberty Baptist T. S., Lynchburg, VA; Mid-American Baptist T. S., Memphis, TN; Midwestern Baptist T. S., Kansas City, MO; New Orleans Baptist T. S., New Orleans, LA; North American Baptist T. S., Sioux Falls, SD; North American Baptist T. S., Edmonton, Alberta; Northern Baptist T. S., Lombard, IL; Northwestern Schools, Minneapolis, MN; Pillsbury College, Owatonna, MN; Southeastern Baptist T. S., Wake Forest, NC; Southern Baptist T. S., Louisville, KY; Southwestern Baptist T. S., Fort Worth, TX; Spurgeon's College, London, England; Toronto Baptist T. S., Toronto, Ontario; Western Conservative Baptist T. S., Portland, OR.

¹⁴W. R. McNutt, *op.cit.* p. 107.

¹⁵*A Debate Between Rev. A. Campbell and Rev. N. L. Rice*. Lexington, KY: A. T. Skillman, 1844. Pp. 579-912.

¹⁶*Op.cit.* P. 762.

¹⁷Mt. 7:15; 15:6; 21:13; 23:24; 24:24; Mk. 7:9, 13; 11:17; 13:21-23; Lk. 21:8; Jn. 8:44, 45; 10:10; 15:22-25; Acts 29:29-31; 1 Cor. 15:12; 2 Cor. 11:2-4, 13-15; Gal. 1:6-9; 3:1; 5:7; 6:12, 13; Eph. 4:14; Phil. 3:2, 18, 19; Col. 2:4, 8, 18-23; 2 Thess. 2:2-4, 9-11; 1 Tim. 1:3-7; 4:1-3, 7; 6:3-5, 20, 21; 2 Tim. 2:16-18; 3:1-9, 13; 4:3, 4; Titus 1:10-14; 3:9-11; 2 Peter 2:1-3, 12-22; 3:3, 4, 16; 1 Jn. 2:18, 22, 26; 3:7; 4:1, 3, 6; 2 Jn. 7, 9, 10; Jude 4, 8, 10-19; Rev. 2:14, 15, 20-25; 13:5; 16:13; 19:20; 20:8

¹⁸2 Thess. 2:15; 1 Tim. 4:16; 6:14, 20; 2 Tim. 1:13, 14; 2:2; 3:14; 4:5; Titus 1:9; 2:1; Heb. 4:14; 10:23; 2 Peter 1:12; 1 Jn. 2:24; Jude 3, 20; Rev. 2:13, 25; 3:8, 10; 22:7.

¹⁹N. B. C. *Annual*, 1922, pp. 130, 133-4. As quoted by Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1950). p. 446.

²⁰This list makes use of the scriptural confessions in P. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.) II, 4-7.

²¹E. Y. Mullins, *Baptist Beliefs*. Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1912. P. 6.

²²P. Scherer, *For we have this Treasure*. New York: Harper, 1944. P. 71.



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¹⁸Thess. 2:15; 1 Tim. 4:16; 6:14, 20; 2 Tim. 1:13, 14; 2:2; 3:14; 4:5; Titus 1:9; 2:1; Heb. 4:14; 10:23; 2 Peter 1:12; 1 Jn. 2:24; Jude 3, 20; Rev. 2:13, 25; 3:8, 10; 22:7.

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²²P. Scherer, *For we have this Treasure*. New York: Harper, 1944. P. 71.



News

Founders Press Moves Forward

Two more titles are due to be published this Spring by Founders Press. *A Foundation for the Future: The Southern Message and Mission*, by Tom Nettles is an excellent introduction into the heritage, present challenges and future prospects of the Southern Baptist Convention. *A String of Pearls Unstrung: A Theological Journal into Believers' Baptism* by Fred Malone is the long-anticipated chronicle of the author's move away from paedo-baptism to believers' baptism.

Other works which are scheduled to be published include *A Southern Baptist Looks at the Biblical Doctrine of Election*, by Ernest Reisinger; *A Sermon on Election*, by C. D. Mallary; and *The Way of Faith* by Phil Newton. Several other projects are under consideration, including a discipleship Bible study series as well as a full-length church history textbook.

Please pray for the work of Founders Press as it seeks to develop and produce literature which will help promote spiritual and theological renewal. This work is dependent on the financial contributions of those who stand with us for the cause of reformation and revival. Tax deductible gifts may be sent to Founders Press, P. O. Box 150931, Cape Coral, FL 33915.

Change in SBFC Leadership

At the end of the 1996 Founders Conference the resignation of Tom Ascol as the Conference Coordinator went into effect. He had informed the Planning Committee of his intentions in December 1995. Hal Wynn, Pastor of Northside Baptist Church in North Ft. Myers, Florida, has been elected to fill the position. For the last several years Wynn has coordinated the registration of the conference. He will continue with those duties in addition to his new responsibilities of providing leadership to the overall planning process for the annual meeting in Birmingham. Ascol continues to serve as the Editor of the *Founders Journal* and is leading the development of Founders Press.

12th Annual Editora Fiel Conference in Brazil

Under the guidance of founder and missionary Richard Denham the publishing house, Editora Fiel, sponsored its twelfth Leadership Conference for Pastors and church workers in Brazil. Two Southern Baptist pastors from the United States were the conference speakers. Mark Dever, from the Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington D. C., spoke 7 times on the "Marks of a Healthy Church" and once on "The Value of the Puritans for Today." Tom Ascol, from the Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, Florida, spoke four times on "Spiritual Warfare" and four times on "The Bible for Today" (its authority, power, sufficiency and finality).

A record number of pastors were among the 492 adult registrants with twenty one of Brazil's twenty six states represented. Many traveled more than fifty hours one way by bus to attend. Over 425 video tapes and 1000 audio tapes of the messages were sold during the week. Pastors and leaders from churches in the Baptist Convention of Brazil met during the week to pray about and organize efforts to labor for biblical reformation and revival within their denomination.

The Editora Fiel ministry is worthy of the prayerful and practical support of all who love the gospel of God's grace

and want to see His kingdom advance around the world. For more information contact Richard Denham at Christian Literature Advance, P.O. Box 5532, Chula Vista, California, USA,, 91912-5532.

1997 Southern Baptist Founders YOUTH Conference

The next Founders YOUTH Conference is scheduled for June 16-20, 1997 at Panama City Beach, Florida. Preachers for the week are Dr. Phil Newton, Pastor of Southwoods Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, and Mr. Paul Stith, Associate Pastor of Northside Baptist Church in North Ft. Myers, Florida. For more information contact Pastor Bill Ascol at 318/798-7088.

