



How Do We Know Who We Are?

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- *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, 1707-1807*, ed. A. D. Gillette published originally Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1851. New printing,

Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2002. Designated as a Tricentennial Edition edited by Terry Wolever. Includes expanded and new indices; 546 pp. plus xxiv pp. of preface materials. ISBN 1-888514-14-0. *Tom J. Nettles*

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The Founders Journal

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How Do We Know Who We Are?

[Tom J. Nettles](#)

Discussions concerning Baptist *origins* excited controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention at the end of the nineteenth-century into the twentieth century. The Landmark movement, according to *Old Landmarkism: What Is It?* wanted "to preserve and perpetuate the doctrine of the divine origin and sanctity of the churches of Christ, and the unbroken continuity of Christ's kingdom, 'from the days of John the Baptist until now.'" They were convinced that Matthew 16:18 and Hebrews 12:28 spoke of Baptist churches. While W. H. Whitsitt agreed with Landmarkism concerning the doctrines of Baptist identity, when he expressed his dissent from their viewpoint of origins and perpetuity in *A Question in Baptist History*, it cost him the presidency of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The discussion has broadened. Now the issue of Baptist *identity* has come to the forefront. William Brackney in *The Baptists* has pointed to identity as a perennially controversial issue (ix-xiv). Some parties in the discussion argue for a very narrow definition of Baptist identity. They focus on the distinctives related to liberty and independence; they have minimized the importance of positive doctrinal affirmations. Doctrinal definition intruded into Baptist life from fundamentalism and eventually neo-evangelicalism but was alien to the original Baptist ethos, so they say. On the other hand, others try to demonstrate that the distinctive tenets of freedom and *voluntarism* would never produce a Baptist church apart from a broader foundation of theological, christological, and soteriological truths.

Perhaps the gap between these two interpretations is beginning to be bridged. Fisher Humphreys, in the 2002 version of *The Way We Were*, has suggested an interpretation of *Baptistness* that includes the broad theological foundation as prelude to ideas uniquely Baptist. He calls these "Beliefs Baptist Share with All Christians," "Beliefs Baptist Share with Protestant Christians," "Beliefs Unique to Baptists," and "Beliefs Baptists Share with Revivalist Christians." These four categories combine to give twenty-eight separate doctrines that Humphreys suggests as formative of healthy Baptist life. Among them are the Trinity, orthodox Christology, the authority of Scripture, justification by grace through faith, believers' church, separation of church and state, conversion, assurance, evangelism, and missions. He insists that "to understand Baptists one must attend not only to the beliefs distinctive to Baptists but also to the beliefs that Baptists hold in common with other Christian groups" (35). This approach holds promise for helpful dialogue and gives credibility to the larger confessional heritage of Baptists.

Another encouraging mark of the book is that Walter Shurden has recommended it heartily. Shurden has operated within the narrow definition group and has concentrated his energies on "Baptist distinctives--freedom of conscience, religious liberty, separation of church and state" and has seemingly dedicated his e-mail magazine, *The Baptist Studies Bulletin*, to the propagation of these ideas. In the first issue of this magazine, January 2002, along with these distinctives, however, he emphasized the need for "unapologetic convictions" to accompany free and voluntary faith and "religious responsibility" to

accompany religious freedom. Perhaps his endorsement of Humphreys' more wholistic model means that an openness to the strong evidence for orthodoxy and reformed evangelicalism could squeek in for a hearing.

Given this encouraging advance in the discussion, one must still recognize major differences between Humphreys (and Shurden) and those he denominates the new leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention. That, in fact, constitutes a large portion of what Humphreys does in the book. For example, Humphreys, along with most of the writers for the moderate position, continues to represent the argument concerning the inerrancy of the autographs of Scripture as only a recent development in the history of the church and a useless doctrine (90-92, 138-9). Humphreys also accepts the idea that the Bible can easily be compartmentalized into issues of faith and practice as opposed to history and science (142). This is very tricky business. The incarnation, the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, and their relation to a real historical fall of Adam certainly require the relevance of history to New Testament faith.

A second problem is his representation of Calvinism. His discussion of six "minority traditions" coincides with his July 1980 *History and Heritage* article, "Current Theological Trends Among Southern Baptists." In the book he adds "Anabaptist Beliefs." He is right to list Calvinism is a minority position but is wrong to imply Southern Baptists make the most direct theological connection with the anti-Calvinistic General Baptists (67). He makes no mention of the powerful impact English Particular Baptists made on the origin and growth of Baptists in America. Puzzling. Also missing is any recognition of the peculiarly strong and persistent commitment to the Particular Baptist Calvinism among Baptists in the South. While he systematically mentions the *Baptist Faith and Message* 1963 on other doctrines, he mentions nothing about the Calvinism of articles IV and V. In fact, his own discussion of repentance and faith (71) contradicts article IV-A. For some reason, he does not see that article as "descriptive" of Baptist belief. In addition, he perpetuates the misconception that the so-called Sandy Creek tradition presents a corrective contrast to Particular Baptist Calvinism (72). We should ask Richard Furman if his Separate Baptist foundations hindered his Particular Baptist preaching and pastoral ministry.

Humphreys shows deference to Calvinism in an early paragraph (68) conceding that "it has good claims to be true to Scripture." His subsequent discussion--understandably for one who would like to limit if not eliminate Calvinistic influence--has an increasingly corrosive effect on his earlier admissions. For example, "Calvinists among Southern Baptists today are highly committed to missions and evangelism" (68) compared with "But Southern Baptists suspect that they would lose their commitment to these things if they adopted Calvinism, and there is good reason to think they are right about that" (69). It is strange reasoning that concludes that Calvinism would cause people to lose their commitment to issues to which Calvinists are highly committed. This criticism repeats his observation in the 1980 article that Southern Baptists have "learned from experience that human efforts at evangelism and missions do make a difference." Of course! Was not the "Attempt great things for God" the human action derived from the Calvinist confidence that we could in reality "Expect great things from God"?

Apart from the importance of those individual items concerning Baptist identity, another more foundational issue takes a beating in Humphreys' presentation. He believes that Baptists have used confessions only as descriptive of faith and not as prescriptive. "Creeds that are used prescriptively are

wrong" (124). Because of that he laments the possibility that "the new majority tradition will no longer include a resistance to prescriptive creeds" (141). When Humphreys recalls the confessional violations of Dale Moody, he reluctantly expresses a conviction that trustees cannot simply allow any teaching without restraint. He concedes, "In schools, regrettably, it is necessary to place constraints on professors, and this amounts to creedalism" (126). Such a condition "falls below the Baptist ideal."

To remedy this unbecoming and unbaptistic creedalism, Humphreys proposes a very scary and morally shocking solution to this problem. Professors need not believe everything in the document but they should pledge not to teach contradictory to it (126). In areas where they disagree, they can simply keep quiet. This solution presents an unacceptable alternative for professor and institution alike. "To teach in accordance with and not contrary to" carries both positive and negative obligations. "In accordance with" means *ex animo*, as an item of heart-felt belief, as a guide to what he will instruct. He delights in its truths and counts it a privilege to train others so to regard the summaries of revealed truth in the document. What school would want professors that cannot use the confession as a positive and encouraging pedagogical tool? What professor would want to be in a position where he constantly had to be brought up short in proclaiming all that he believed because he was teaching under false pretenses?

Humphreys' non-prescriptive use of confessions gives no means by which Baptists may distinguish themselves from, as well as identify themselves with, other *sola scriptura* groups. Humphreys himself has identified twenty-eight individual beliefs that constitute the majority position in Baptist life. He knows a Baptist by those beliefs and identifies divergence by describing modifications or rejections of those beliefs. Even in his descriptive use of these ideas he is assuming that they are right; it fills him with "sadness" to lose them. Nay, even more severe, such alteration constitutes a "theological tragedy," a "theological disaster" (130, 144). Such language betrays more than an ethos of description; he has invested his "description" with a moral oughtness. More is at stake in his mind than "*The Way We Were*;" he describes *the way we ought to be*. Though many would disagree with him on some of the individual items he includes, they, including this writer, would not disagree that loss of confessional identity is a theological disaster. The confession is a seismograph that detects the shaking of the foundation; it also serves as a level by which we may bring the fallen foundation back into line.

Not only does Humphreys himself find it impossible to see confessions as merely descriptive, his representation of the non-prescriptive nature of confessions in Baptist life simply is not the case historically. Only in the twentieth-century has the idea become widespread that it is unbaptistic to use confessions as prescribing belief and, as a corollary, disciplining both church and theological academy in light of the confession. Humphreys joins a chorus that has been swelling since 1979. In 1983, E. Glenn Hinson in *Are Southern Baptists "Evangelicals"?* notes "All observers of Southern Baptists can discern a radical tilt from an anti-creedal toward a creedal stance in theological matters" (187). Bill Leonard writing in 1990, argued that the adoption of a convention-wide confession in 1925 increased confessionalism throughout the century:

Once a confession was written down and officially approved, however, the scene was set for its more arbitrary use in defining the doctrinal parameters of the SBC. The line between

a confession and a creed is thin indeed, In retrospect, it seems Southern Baptists were naïve in their effort to distinguish between confessionalism and creedalism. Since 1979, the distinction has become particularly academic" (*God's Last and Only Hope*, 79).

E. Luther Copeland in *The Southern Baptist Convention and the Judgment of History* includes a chapter entitled "The Enforcement of Orthodoxy." In this he represents Southern Baptists as moving from "non-creedal beginnings to the present highly restrictive creedalism" (113) which he ingeniously constructs as a function of racism. Walter Shurden in his introduction to *Amidst Babel, Speak the Truth* (1993), asserts, "It is a near unanimous opinion among Baptist historians that Baptists have historically been anti-creedal people." They have shunned the adoption of creeds as "theologically restrictive statements" that are designed to curtail "freedom of inquiry" (8). Shurden slightly nuances Leonard in his argument that the SBC managed to ignore the 1925 and 1963 Confessions before 1979. Since then, however, he goes on to charge, fundamentalists have turned a non-binding confession into a "creed that straps the conscience" (*Baptist Studies Bulletin*, June 2002). In 1990 at Southern Seminary, Grady Cothen spoke of "a people historically non-creedal rush[ing] headlong into a narrow creedalism that claims superior authority to holy Scripture."

Given these representations, any indication of a prescriptive use of confessions among Baptists prior to 1979, or particularly prior to 1925, should be rare. Only the occasional kook who understood little about the Baptist contribution to Christian witness would dare suggest, either in church or association, that a confession should have a purifying effect on a Baptist body. The intent of this issue of the *Founders Journal* is to provide some evidence from a variety of witnesses and perspectives that confessions used prescriptively are consistent with the use Baptists have made of them historically. In addition, such a use gives health, spiritual vitality, unity and a sense of well-defined mission.



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The Health of Confessional Christianity

Tom J. Nettles

Individual freedom excommunicated organized doctrine for about six decades of the twentieth century. Baptists, as a testimony to their belief in the clarity and infallibility of Scripture, must recapture with candor and honesty the love for consistent, coherent truth that characterized the days of beginning and development. John Spilsbury, pastor of the first Particular Baptist church that arose in seventeenth-century England, reasoned from Scripture that formation of a local church required a confession of faith. Apart from a confession of faith, no covenantal commitment could exist as the foundation for constituting a visible congregation. Only in this way can a group know if they share a common experience and have been shaped by the truth of God's Word toward the same end. Covenanting individuals should know if their goals in worship, witness and teaching are the same. Adherence to a confession demonstrates a necessary unity.

Even when he had reduced his doctrinal expectations to a minimum, John Smyth still gave witness to a confession of faith as the basis for his willingness to unite with others and consider them his brothers in Christ. Although he maintained to the end that true Christians and the openly wicked should not mingle in one congregation, he would no longer call true believers, though they might be in impure churches, Antichristian. He stated

The articles of Religion which are the ground of my salvation, are these, wherein I differ from no good Christian: That Jesus Christ, the Sonne of God, and the Sonne of Marie, is the Anointed King, Priest, and Prophett of the church, the onlie mediator of the new Testament, and that through true repentance and faith in him who alone is our saviour, wee receive remission of sinnes, and the holie ghost in this lyfe, and there-with all the redemption of our bodies, and everlastinge lyfe in the resurrection of the bodie: and whosoever walketh accordinge to this rule, I must needs acknowledge him my brother: yea, although he differ from me in divers other particulars.

Though minimal in its content, Smyth still expected a clear expression of a distinctive view of Christ, repentance from sin and faith in Him, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the resurrection of the body.

Confessions never have substituted for the Bible but have been useful expressions of biblical truth. These expositions have been used to declare faith, to test its existence in others, and to encourage study of the Bible. Confessions serve to organize and extend biblical exposition. All expressions of doctrine in a confession must have root in biblical exposition. Next, these separate expository truths find fuller expression in their synthetic organization into a biblical "doctrine." All that the Bible has to say about God's dealing with sinners in a gracious way to restore them to Himself may be organized into the biblical doctrine of salvation. Texts from Genesis to Revelation would be included in this doctrine; the

organized presentation of it would not detract from biblical truth but would give powerful expression to it.

Not only exposition and synthesis, but internal connection should characterize a useful confession. Synthesis connects Scriptures on the same subject with each other to form a doctrine. These doctrines then must be described in such a way as demonstrates that unbroken streams of truth flow into a mighty river of truth. Each developed doctrine plays its part in giving expression to the one faith expressed in the whole of divine revelation. The doctrine of sin may not be separated from the doctrine of redemption which in turn flows from the doctrine of the work of Christ which cannot be understood in its fullness apart from Christ's person. All of these point to the wisdom and purpose of God and the flow of all history to that great confession of all creation, "Jesus is Lord,"--a history shattering shout which will give glory to God even as he speaks to some, "Depart from me you evildoers, I never knew you," and to others, "Come you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

Confessions are man-made documents. No final authority may be claimed for them, therefore, and they may be altered as new understandings arise or new challenges call for the organized expression of a biblical truth. The doctrine of creation has called for the addition of new affirmations in light of the challenge of scientific materialism. Technology and the sexual revolution call for confessional statements about the biblical view of sexuality, the origin and value of life and the nature of the family. Providential events often cause the church to give new energy to understanding the Bible's view of a topic not envisioned by generations before us. All the skills of synthesis, inference and coherent arrangement called for by the production of a confession are valuable in creating a position on these new challenges.

Certain themes of the Bible, however, emerge as intentionally central to its message and must be confessed in any generation. Their expressions in confessional terms do not await a lengthy providential provocation. The doctrines of God, creation, mankind, sin, redemption, the person and work of Christ, judgment, heaven and hell bear so heavily on the central purpose of Scripture that they have appeared as items of confession from the beginning. Their clarity has been increasing through the centuries and some aspects of their confessional history may be considered so profoundly enunciated that little change may be expected or even tolerated. Reaffirmation of these clearly defined doctrines must be a part of true reformation.

Baptist history has not been short on such confessions or high confidence in their usefulness. Individuals, churches, associations and larger denominational structures have produced confessions. John Smyth, John Spilsbury, Thomas Collier, Andrew Fuller, John Gill, John Clarke, Obadiah Holmes, Isaac Backus, John Leland and others have produced personal confessions of faith which they were glad to publish to the world to show their agreement with other Christians and to define a specific stance which they felt they could relinquish only under the guilt of the blood of souls.

Churches established confessions by which they would define their mission and discipline their membership. William Stokes wrote an essay on creeds that the Midland Association published in its two-

hundredth anniversary history. Stokes, from Birmingham, argued that "it is not enough, therefore, that a man declares that he believes the Bible." Christian communities have not only a right, but an obligation, to ask in what sense he believes the Bible--as a Socinian, an Arian, or a Pelagian? Creeds not only have declared the faith of Christian communities but have served "to test and expose the character of dishonest men, who, under the plea of believers, entered the church to pollute its doctrine and to divide and scatter its members." Creeds then, as they should be now, were used against "the agents of the wicked one" who had crept into the church. "The orthodox creed was employed by the Church to correct the mischief by excluding the men."[\[1\]](#)

Stokes recognized that some opposed the formulation of creeds. He believed that they were misled and confused two essentially different things, "the voluntary declaration of religious belief by Christian men, with the imposition of a creed by the civil magistrate." This misunderstanding has implicated "the liberty of the one act, in the appropriate condemnation of the other." What Christian would not be delighted to confess his faith to the world to set his witness in the open air and light for all to investigate? Those who have departed from the faith once delivered to the saints, with a few notable exceptions, maintain "an equivocal reserve" to make public such confession "under the pleas of adherence to the Scriptures." Stokes asked his readers to contrast the two ways.

But who are most to be admired,--those who surround their profession with this mysterious reserve, and who in too many instances lead along an *unknown path* until it is too late to escape from the gloomy labyrinth? The advantages of an open-hearted honesty in a matter of such moment, are far too great to be bartered for the dry sentimentality of the Arian, or the frigid, genteel, but Christless morality of the Socinian party; and when it is remembered that our forefathers set the example with bonds, imprisonment, and death, as the penalty of their fidelity; surely it is not too much to expect that we rigidly adhere to a pattern so noble.[\[2\]](#)

Stokes wanted the Confession of 1689 used as a foundation for Bible study. He wanted all Baptists "to make themselves thoroughly acquainted with the confession of 1689, by carefully examining the whole of its doctrines, with *every passage of Holy Scripture* which is adduced in their support." Later Stokes affirms, "No human system of doctrines and precepts can be more scriptural than this, and none more expressive of the nature and design of the Lively Oracles." To reach that point of conviction, therefore Stokes recommended a thorough and systematic approach to the study.

Let each member, laying his Bible before him, take the confession, statement by statement, paragraph by paragraph, and read seriously every passage of Scripture to which reference is made, and be earnest in seeking to know the mind of Christ in the words he is reading. This should not be done with haste, nor with a light and trifling spirit, but with seriousness, with gravity, and above all with fervent prayer for that blessed Spirit who "helpeth our infirmities." It should be done in the spirit of those who know they are living for eternity, and that above all other things it is necessary for them to understand what they are about--what they are required to believe and obey--and how they are to act,--in order to have a

solid confidence in the world to come. Every man is bound to know on what he is building his hope for eternal life, and to ascertain with precision, whether, what he takes for truth is really "the truth as it is in Jesus."[\[3\]](#)

When Alexander Campbell made war against Baptists as "tyrannical...in converting their own little confessions and covenants into creeds of excommunicating power and efficiency," many Baptists resented his insinuation that Baptists acted as medieval inquisitors or minions of the Star Chamber by opposing his doctrine. Affirming only the authority of Scripture as the "bond of union and communion" and resisting any characterization as creedalists, the editor of the *Western Baptist Review* nevertheless affirms the same lofty witness to truth as does William Stokes. "Suffice it to say," the editor opines,

That we know of nothing in the scriptures or in common sense, that requires the churches to be gagged, to prevent their proclaiming to the world, in this way, what they believe to be the great truths of our religion--that requires them to conceal their light under a bushel. And it is well known that churches, by publishing creeds, have stayed the injurious influences of slander and misrepresentation.... Indeed, unless a church is ashamed of her doctrine, we can see no good reason for her shrinking from its publication. Truth needs no concealment and seeks none. It seeks the light and the day. It shuns coverts and hiding-places, and stands on the mountain top to be seen and known of all men.[\[4\]](#)

Fullness in a confession of faith, however, should not inhibit the reception of new converts into church membership. A credible testimony of a saving work of grace gives babes in Christ joyful entrée to the community of believers. The minimum of truth couched within a credible conversion testimony, however, does not suffice for the standard to which the babe should grow.

B. H. Carroll said, "The minimum of entrance qualification into the church can never be made the limit of the church creed, and especially cannot be made the limit of examination for ordination to the ministry."[\[5\]](#) Associations adopted confessions and expected their member churches to abide by the truth as there expressed, openly to propagate it through preaching and teaching, and joyfully to conform to its expressions and its implications as long as they maintained the association's fellowship. Denominational structures have flourished or faltered in proportion to their willingness to give open adherence to a healthy confession of faith. An unwillingness to confess a body of definite truth often betrays a spiritual sickness unto death already at work. Even in his day, Carroll observed that denominational institutions were "passing into the hands of infidels and semi-infidels" due to the "absence of definite articles of faith to be subscribed by either teacher or trustees."[\[6\]](#) A true reformation must recapture the willingness as well as the historical and biblical aptitude to embrace a strong confession of faith. Again Carroll expresses with power and clarity the ultimate goal of confessing Christianity.

A Christian's creed should enlarge, and not diminish, up to the last utterance of revelation in order that each article might be transmitted into experience.

A church with a little creed is a church with a little life. The more doctrines a church can

agree on, the greater its power, and the wider its usefulness. The fewer its articles of faith, the fewer its bonds of union and compactness.

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

This body of truth, constituting the creed of the church, is held as of inestimable value, and was ready to pronounce anathema against an angel from heaven who would preach any other gospel. It is a radical mistake to say that these New Testament articles of faith were few and simple. They touched, among other things, the nature, being, attributes, and offices of the triune God; the Holy inspired Scriptures, the church with its polity, terms of membership, officers, ordinances, and mission; the whole plan of salvation from election, foreordination, and predestination to glorification; the family; the citizen, the whole of this life, and the whole of the life to come; the ministry of angels good and the opposition of angels bad; and the final judgment.

Particularly they touched the personality of the Messiah, his pre-existence and deity, his emptying himself of his heavenly glory and prerogatives to assume in his first advent the body of his humiliation, in order to his vicarious expiation of sin on the cross, his going in his spirit after death to make the atonement in the holy of holies; his second advent to earth in order to assume his body of glorification, and his ascension and exaltation to the throne of the universe as a royal priest; his sending of his vicar, or vicegerent, the Holy Spirit, to accredit, infill, endue with power, and to abide with his church on earth; his third advent to assume his mystical body, the glorified church, to raise the dead and judge the world.

Broad as is the forgoing statement, it does not include all the clearly defined articles of the New Testament faith. ...

Very solemnly I would warn the reader against any teaching that decries doctrines, or which would reduce the creed of the church into two or three articles.[\[7\]](#)

Reformation and Confession cannot be separated.

Notes:

¹ William Stokes, "Essay on Creeds" in *The History of the Midland Association of Baptist Churches from its Rise in the Year 1655 to 1855* (London: H. Theobald, 1855), 10, 11, 13.

² Ibid., 15.

³ Ibid., 15, 16.

⁴ Editor, "An Explanation of the Use of Creeds Among Baptists," in *Western Baptist Review*, vol 1, no. 3 (November, 1845), 140, 141.

⁵ B. H. Carroll, *Colossians, Ephesians, and Hebrews*, in *An Interpretation of the English Bible*, ed. J. B. Cranfill (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973 reprint of Nashville: Broadman Press, 1948), 149.

⁶ Carroll, "Safeguards of the Seminary" in *The Baptist Standard*, January 13, 1910.

⁷ Carroll, *Ephesians*,..., 140, 145, 146.



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News

Church Planting Partnership in West Florida

The West Florida Founders Fraternal recently began a "New Works Ministry" to help newly-planted SBC churches that are purposefully Reformed. A "Mobile Chapel" project is designed to provide a temporary worship center (up to 36 months) until the new congregation can begin their own building program. Join in this groundbreaking effort as a financial partner! Fraternals, churches or individuals may support by a monthly or one-time contribution. Contact: Pastor Greg Alford, First Baptist Church, Ponce de Leon, FL. Phone: 850-836-4046 or 850-859-2822. E-mail: galford@aic-fl.com; (or) Pastor Russell Taylor, The Shepherd's Church, Crestview, FL. Phone: 850-537-8202 or 850-621-2141. E-mail: RussellTaylor@cyou.com.

New Founders Press Title

The Way of Faith by Dr. Phil Newton is an excellent, evangelistic, brief (28 pages) booklet which sets forth God's wonderful plan of salvation and man's need for such a plan beginning with the truth of God as Creator. The booklet provides a clear presentation of the gospel message, how one becomes a Christian and man's desperate need to do so. Each section ends with "Think It Over" questions that are helpful for personal study or group discussion. The booklet concludes with a helpful list of recommended books for additional reading. Sure to be a useful tool in discipling efforts! The book retails for \$2.00 each (quantity discounts: 11-99 copies are \$1.75 each; 100+ copies are \$.75 each. Order today from our website (www.founders.org).



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On the Other Hand: The Decline of Confessions

[Tom J. Nettles](#)

When W. B. Johnson gave his address to the public subsequent to the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845, he included an idiosyncratic statement that has fueled the anti-confessional theories of Baptist identity of the twentieth century. Johnson, clearly on this issue out of harmony with his brethren in the South, stated, "We have constructed for our basis no new creed; acting in this matter upon a Baptist aversion for all creeds but the Bible." Though Johnson sought to have his particular resistance to creeds adopted in several instances, those who followed his views were in a vast minority.^[1] Johnson saw no scriptural command for creeds, he feared that theology by tradition would supplant the authority of Christ, and he believed that the Bible itself was so infinitely superior to any human condensation of its teachings that desire for a creed was absurd.

More immediately responsible for contemporary resistance to confessions as a tool of definition is the lingering legacy of E. Y. Mullins. Although Mullins wrote a systematic theology and spent his life discussing Christian doctrine and Baptist doctrine, his blows against what he called the *a priori* method of so-called Protestant Scholasticism fostered in his doctrinal progeny an ambiguous, if not negative, attitude to confessions.

Mullins maintained some elements of that tradition and encouraged the use of confessions and creeds within a limited context. The limitations came, however, not from his immediate orthodox Baptist context but from influences present in his New England experience from 1895 to 1899. The great Baptist proponent of the "New Theology," William Newton Clarke, served as pastor in Newton Center, Massachusetts, from 1869-1880. Mullins was there fifteen years later. While Mullins did not advocate Clarke's modernistic approach to Scripture, his affinity for the dynamic of human experience and the mitigation of established definitions in doctrinal development was similar to the methodology of Clarke.^[2]

In addition, New England Baptists under the influence of Francis Wayland exhibited a wavering attitude toward confessions. While Wayland argued that Baptists had maintained "invariably the truth of their early confessions," they did it while not "one in ten thousand of our members ever heard of their existence." Both Baptist ecclesiology and the authority of Scripture in the life of each individual precluded the possibility of established creeds. He contended, unlike the previous generation under the influence of Isaac Backus, that the absence of such an "established creed is in itself the cause of our unity."^[3]

Mullins reflected the ambivalent confluence of these two streams of thought, the Southern tradition and the New England tradition. He still admitted that creeds "help rather than hinder," especially as a tool to

educate us "to unity of faith and practice" and "as means of propagating the faith." In addition, he believed that a group united by confession "must judge when an individual or group within the larger body has departed from the common view sufficiently to warrant separation." [4]

For an individual to insist on his right to remain within a group after "radical and hopeless divergence of belief has arisen" is no less a tyranny than forcing the beliefs of a group on an individual. Mullins was willing to enforce this idea practically, as indicated in his speech to the 1923 Southern Baptist Convention. After listing a number of simple doctrinal affirmations, Mullins stated, "We believe that adherence to the above truths and facts is a necessary condition of service for teachers in our Baptist schools." [5]

Mullins crystallized all of these points in an article entitled "Baptists and Creeds." [6] Because of objections on the part of some (most vigorously from his own faculty member, W. O. Carver) to the adoption of a convention-wide confession of faith, Mullins was forced to justify this action. Mullins dismisses four fallacies concerning creeds and answered four reasons for opposing a restatement of beliefs. On three occasions in the short article he answered the misimpression that creeds oppose Baptist views of liberty. He believed that some interpreted liberty as license and others misapplied liberty as "an exaggerated individualism." Mullins spoke of the "group right of self-protection." As Baptists are trustees of certain truths "they have an inalienable right to conserve and propagate those truths unmolested by others inside the denomination who oppose those truths." Mullins believed that the adoption of a new confession--and by this he had in mind the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message--would correct some "deadly tendencies at work--deadly." A confession would help "clear the atmosphere and learn where we are drifting."

On the other hand, his language to describe the dangers of creeds can be picturesque and compelling. Despite his call for adherence to truths as a necessary condition of service, Mullins was in print as saying that "as soon as [creeds] become binding they become divisive" and "inevitably lead to mischief in the church." [7] He speaks of creeds as becoming "stereotyped and formal" and used as "death masks for defunct religion" or "lashes to chastise others." A creed without life "becomes a chain to bind, not wings on which the soul may fly." Nothing is more distasteful than the idea of a barren intellectualism, void of life, where creeds may become "whips to coerce men into uniformity of belief by carnally-minded champions of the faith." [8]

Mullins encouraged a tentative and mediating approach toward confessions by creating a false dichotomy. Baptists are not creed-makers he said, because "the Scriptures are a sufficient revelation of his will." [9]

The sufficiency of Scripture is not the only spiritual reality to which creeds may be antagonistic. Drawing on the personalism of Borden Parker Bowne, Mullins always harbored in his bosom the suspicion that commitment to propositional truth stood as a rival to one's awareness of the personal activity of God in the world. "They," creeds, that is, "become barriers to the free development of personality in religion," Mullins feared, when the propagation of them takes the place of the personal

dimension of the God/man relationship.[\[10\]](#)

In spite of recognizing their strengths, Mullins' warnings about the possible killing effects of creeds overwhelmed his attempts to present a balance. When he defended the use of confessions, or even creeds, he did so sincerely but seemingly as a foil, a contrast enhancing his own objections. His heightened emphasis on the superiority of experience to creed, his clear warnings about the dangers of creeds, and the vivid images he evoked in speaking of their oppressive use tended to neutralize their advantages as instruments of education, definition, and discipline. Some of his warnings, though warranted if a genuine danger were present, were overstated and treated the worst possible scenario as the most possible scenario. Mullins' powerful influence succeeded in softening, if not dissolving, the more consistent Baptist approach as represented by J. P. Boyce's approach to the use of creeds.[\[11\]](#)

That this particular aspect of Mullins's view of confessions has multiplied in strength may be seen in Frank Mauldin's treatment of the Baptist view of "Personal Truth." Mauldin asserts that a radical dichotomy exists between the "personal truth" of entering into the life of the living God and any supposed propositional truths of Scripture. "Truth is someone real, not something true," writes Mauldin. He considers the emphasis on scriptural truths stated as propositions, especially as doctrines of Calvinism, as a declension from the genius of Baptist life. In an unusual observation he makes about decline among American Baptists he pinpoints doctrinal unity as a sign of decline.

The Regular and the Separate Baptists of Virginia unite around similar orthodox propositions. They deny that their confession usurps individual freedom, yet they affirm that it contains the essential truths of the gospel, and that the doctrine of salvation by Christ and by free unmerited grace alone ought to be believed by every Christian. Then they add, "upon these terms we are united." The reality of persons in relation within the life-world of the gospel does not unite Virginia Baptists. In a most unbaptistic way doctrines do. The declension, although momentary, is obvious.[\[12\]](#)

Attention to propositional truth as a unifying factor among Baptists consistently ranks as an evidence of decline for Baptists in Mauldin's treatment. Although Mauldin justly, and with abundant precedence on Baptist thought, emphasizes God's immediate action in the life of the believer and insists that true knowledge must transcend mere intellectual assent, he labors to create the same false dichotomy as Mullins did in his worst moments. The mass of Baptist witness affirms the interdependence of propositional truth from Scripture and a relational knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Mauldin takes as a paradigm some of the extreme statements of John Smyth, the General Baptist, and Paul Hobson, the almost-mystical Particular Baptist, and employs highly selective quotations from other Baptist leaders of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He even discusses John Brine and John Gill and sees both of them as tragic figures that held to some aspects of the "personal truth" but allowed rationalism to corrupt their consistent Baptist witness. Gill's position on the work of the Spirit, according to Mauldin, is flawed in that "in the interplay of the Spirit of God and the scriptures in the individual believer, what the Spirit secures is not 'the truth as it is in Jesus' but a revelation that consists of

evangelical truths in the form of statements."^[13]

Mauldin takes seriously the Mullinsean conviction that creeds "become barriers to the free development of personality in religion" and "a chain to bind, not wings on which the soul may fly." One may warrantably wonder why precise information and unadulterated truth imposes hindrances on the development of personality, unless one desires freedom to develop apart from the guidance of truth. Can our obedience to God be truly personal and filled with respect for His holiness if it takes no regard for His commandments? Can our praise to Him be acceptable if it is not formed by His truthful revelation of His character? Should we be like those against whom Paul wrote whose regulations were mere human commands and doctrines (Colossians 2:22, 23). Or do we show love to God and restore the image of God in human personality and really grasp "the truth as it is in Jesus" when our thinking, talking, walking, worshipping and witnessing follows the pattern of sound words and protects the deposit of truth (2 Timothy 1:8-14)?

Notes:

¹ For a concise and informative discussion of Johnson's views and influences, see Greg Wills, "Baptists and Their Churches in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," in Mark Dever, *Polity: A Collection of Historic Baptist Documents*, (Washington DC: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 31-33. For a recent brief presentation of Johnson as normative for Baptist views of confessions see Doug Weaver in "Baptist Bits" in the *The Baptist Studies Bulletin*, January, 2002.

² William Newton Clarke, *What Shall We Think of Christianity?* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), 52. This book comes from the content of the Levering Lectures delivered at Johns Hopkins University in 1899. Though Mullins maintained the assertions of theological conservatism, his discussion of the development of Scripture as it relates to Christian doctrine is remarkably like that of Clarke. In lecture two entitled "The Christian Doctrine" Clarke stated, "Doctrine was no such formal, external thing as to take up something merely because it had been said, even though it were by the Lord himself. No, doctrine grew up in the experience of Christian living. It was the Christian truth as learned by the Christian people; and both elements, the truth and the experience, were essential to the producing of it. Any thought that did not take root in this vital soil, and take root to stay and live, did not come to form a part of the Christian doctrine" (52, 53).

³ Francis Wayland, *Notes on the Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches*, ed. John H. Hinton (London: J. Heaton and Son, 1861), 1-4.

⁴ E. Y. Mullins, *Baptist Beliefs*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1925 [ninth printing 1962] first copyright 1912 by Baptist World Publishing Company), 8. Also see *Freedom and Authority in Religion*, 301, 302.

⁵ Baker, *Sourcebook*, 205. Baker took the document from the *Annual* of the Southern Baptist Convention of 1925. This quote comes from a statement on "Science and Religion" made by Mullins at the 1923

convention and adopted at that time. By vote of the convention it was added to the articles of faith adopted in 1925 at Memphis.

⁶ E. Y. Mullins, "Baptists and Creeds" in *Axioms of Religion*, comp. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. , ed. Timothy and Denise George (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 186-191. This article appears in a manuscript notebook in the Mullins Collection in the James P. Boyce Centennial Library at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

⁷ E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, (Philadelphia: the Griffith & Rowland Press, 1908), 143.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9, 10.

⁹ *Axioms*, 146.

¹⁰ *Freedom and Authority*, 302.

¹¹ Boyce strongly defends the use of a "Creed" by Baptists in his *Three Changes in Theological Institutions*, (Greenville, SC: C. J. Elford's book and Job Press, 1856), 33-44. After giving his defense Boyce concludes, "It is, therefore, gentlemen, in perfect consistency with the position of Baptists, as well as of Bible Christians, that the test of doctrine I have suggested to you, should be adopted. It is based upon principles and practices sanctioned by the authority of Scripture, and by the usage of our people" (44). B. H. Carroll, the founder of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and president during much of Mullins's tenure at Southern, shared the convictions of Boyce on creeds. In his exposition of Ephesians 4:1-16, Carroll contended, "The modern cry: 'Less creed and more liberty,' is a degeneration from the vertebrate to the jellyfish, and means less unity and less morality, and it means more heresy. Definitive truth does not create heresy--it only exposes and corrects. Shut off the creed and the Christian world would fill up with heresy unsuspected and uncorrected, but none the less deadly" (*Colossians, Ephesians, Hebrews in An Interpretation of the English Bible* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973 {reprint of 1948 Broadman Press edition}], 140). Carroll observed that denominational institutions were "passing into the hands of infidels and semi-infidels" due to the "absence of definite articles of faith to be subscribed by either teacher or trustees." ("Safeguards of the Seminary" in *The Baptist Standard*, January 13, 1910).

¹² Frank Louis Mauldin, *The Classic Baptist Heritage of Personal Truth*, (Franklin, TN: Providence House Publishers, 1999), Xiv, 113. Although Mauldin's emphasis on the reality of God's action in the life of the believer and the necessity of knowledge being personal rather than merely intellectual assent catches the spirit of a portion of the historic Baptist witness, he labors to create a false dichotomy. The mass of Baptist witness affirms the interdependence of propositional truth from Scripture and a relational knowledge of Jesus Christ. Mauldin takes as a paradigm some of the extreme statements of John Smyth and Paul Hobson and employs highly selective quotations from other Baptist leaders of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

¹³ Ibid., 105.



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Confession: A Union of Heart between Sheep and Shepherd

[Tom J. Nettles](#)

The Foundation for a Ministry of Truth-telling

Relationships between pastor and people begin with a common commitment to truth. The primary task of a minister of the gospel, and indeed the task that defines all else that he does, is the proclamation of a message. In its role as reflector of the wisdom, power and grace of God, the church has as perhaps its preeminent function the proclamation, defense and confirmation of the gospel. Of great consequence, therefore, to both pastor and people is the determination that they agree on the content of the message that largely will give shape to their lives together and their mutual efforts to glorify God.

A Brief Sketch of the Historical Pedigree

John Spilsbury, pastor of the first Particular Baptist Church (see FJ 44, 11) argued that agreement on a confession necessarily preceded any mutual submission to ordinances. As he put it, "persons must be informed of the truth in judgment, and bound by the same in conscience" before they can act together in any function as a church. William Screven, founding pastor of the First Baptist Church, Charleston, SC, showed the continuity of this conviction when, in reflecting on the task of ministry in his final years, he admonished his congregation to supply themselves with an able and faithful minister that would be "orthodox in faith, and of blameless life, and does own the confession of faith put forth by our brethren in London in 1689."

Elias Keach, son of Benjamin Keach, established the first church in the famous Philadelphia Association. He was converted in Pennsylvania while preaching as a practical joke to a group of dissenters. He confessed his imposture, received counsel from a Baptist preacher, Thomas Dungan, in the area, was baptized by him, and soon was called as founding pastor of the Lower Dublin, or Pennepek, church--the first church of what would eventually become the Philadelphia Association. After four years of faithful and zealous pastoral and evangelistic ministry he returned to England where he began to serve as pastor of a church in London at Tallow-Chandlers Hall. He saw clearly the need for a confession of faith to give clear definition both to the being and the well-being of the church. Maintenance of pure faith and practice, in Keach's view of the church, called for a confessional standard. Pastors will serve their churches more efficiently, biblically and spiritually when such a confession is operative. The preface to the articles of faith makes this point and also gives interesting insight into the religious climate of the time.

It is a question, whether any age since the apostles time, hath afforded greater Advantages of Gospel-light than this wherein we live: and I think, without question, that England ... exceeds all other countries upon this account; and yet (to our shame be it spoken) no Age has discovered less Practical Godliness, and more lightness and Vanity than this Century, &c. And tho the Light of the glorious Gospel seems to break forth more clear and transparent than of late Years (as some proclaim) yet nothing more obvious than this, that the Ignorance and Non-proficiency of Professors of Religion in our day, extravagantly exceeds that in the Puritan Age past; so that for want of a clear Understanding and solid judgment, too too many are easily drawn aside to error, by smooth Flesh-pleasing arguments, and sophisms of Men. Hence we see the necessity of catechising Children, and training them up in the true notions of Religion betimes, which we have too great reason to fear by some among us is much neglected; and it evidently appears in many Persons who offer themselves to our churches for Communion (when wrought upon by the grace of God) and tho we cannot, but must in Charity conclude some of them are true and sincere Converts, and therefore dare not refuse them; yet are they received not without some hesitation, when they appear so ignorant and unintelligent by their Expressions, that we should be ready to judge that they had spent most of their days, and been brought up in some wild Parts of America, rather than in such a Goshen Land of Gospel-light, had we not full assurance to the contrary: and indeed this is one great reason why we have published the Articles of our faith, and that in so narrow a compass, and at so small a Price, that it may come into the hands of the Members of the Congregation, for their clearer information and Confirmation in the Doctrine of God our Saviour; and also that they may be the better armed with Spiritual Armour against such who lie in wait to deceive, and be ready at all times to give a reason of the hope that is in them, to the stopping of the mouths of Gainsayers: and hereby all that have their Eyesight, may see (unless they refuse to open their Eyes) that the Baptists are not such scarecrows as some would make the unwary believe, seeing we agree in the main with our Brethren the Godly, among the Episcopal, Presbyterian and Independent Parties, &c. and only differ from them in those things to which Truth and Conscience oblige us.

For practical godliness, intelligent profession, confident union and public testimony, Keach believed that a confession of faith served the church well and honored the revealed truth of God.

John Gill wrote a confession of faith at the beginning of his ministry at Horsly-down, Fair Street, Southwark about a mile from the old London Bridge. According to John Rippon, the confession probably was a slightly modified form of his personal confession. Consisting of twelve articles, it makes strong and clear statements on the doctrines of the fall and sin, the doctrine of God with particular emphasis on the person of Christ, and the doctrines of grace. It begins with an engaging account of the reason for this mutual agreement to doctrinal articles.

Having been enabled, through divine grace, to give up ourselves to the Lord, and likewise to one another by the will of God; we account it a duty incumbent upon us to make a declaration of our faith and practice, to the honour of Christ, and the glory of his name;

knowing, that as with the heart man believeth unto righteousness, so with the mouth confession is made unto salvation-our declaration is as follows: ...

Andrew Fuller, when called to take the charge at the Baptist meeting in Kettering, wrote a confession of faith that he presented during the day of his installation. John Ryland, Jr., remembered that the confession had such powerful effect that Robert Hall, Sr., "was much moved by it, and made ashamed of his own defects." This confession became foundational to Fuller's seismic theological treatise *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*. One item of faith that he thought necessary to explain to this congregation and to all present at the installation was his concept of his duty as a gospel minister. It was expressed in article XV of the confession:

I believe it is the duty of every minister of Christ plainly and faithfully to preach the gospel to all who will hear it; and as I believe the inability of men to spiritual things to be wholly of the moral and therefore of the criminal kind, and that it their duty to love the Lord Jesus Christ and trust in him for salvation though they do not; I therefore, believe free and solemn addresses, invitations, calls, and warnings to them to be not only consistent, but directly adapted, as mean, in the hand of the Spirit of God, to bring them to Christ. I consider it as a part of my duty which I could not omit without being guilty of the blood of souls.

Such a declaration came in the heat of the Modern Question Controversy. Several prominent ministers among the different dissenting denominations had adopted a view opposed to Fuller's understanding of his duty. In the light of the status of that controversy, Fuller felt the burden of conscience not only to acquit himself well in the major doctrinal categories which he addressed in the confession, but on this practical outworking of the theological commitments. Pastor and people must have the same mission, and a clear expression of Fuller's doctrine sealed the relationship.

When the Philadelphia Association met in 1769, the first year that the minutes were printed and distributed by order of the Association, the minutes contained the announcement, "Our Confession of faith may be had at Philadelphia for 15 coppers, half bound. In sheets for 7 coppers. Catechisms, 4 coppers." That was not the only place that their confession of faith received prominence. The minutes record that two churches in New York "sent their messengers with their church covenants and confessions of faith in order to be first known to the Association, and the Association known to them, and then to join it, if mutual approbation should be obtained." After examination, the conclusion was presented to the association that "these churches are orthodox, that they are rightly constituted, their ministers regularly ordained." In light of that the Association recommended that "letters be written to them to signify this our judgment, and to own them as sister churches." Though such careful theological examination and judgment as a necessary prelude to conscientious fellowship would seem strange to the ears of many a twenty-first century Baptist, it was normal procedure for our more doctrinally astute and biblically disciplined forefathers.

On the same page of the *Minutes*, as if to reprimand proleptically our confusion of categories, the

Association adopted a bold approach for the advance of religious liberty. They joined the Warren Association of Rhode Island, and solicited associations in Virginia and Carolina to do the same, in a petition to the legislatures of Boston and Connecticut "in favor of their brethren who suffer for nonconformity to the religious establishments of those colonies." They were looking for a "speedy or effectual redress of their grievances" in "seeking relief for our oppressed brethren." Religious liberty concerned the freedom of churches and individuals to pursue, or not, religious truth and to organize themselves accordingly without interference or repression from the government. The political arrangement of civil society should present no threat to this pursuit. Requirement of confessional fidelity within a church or an association was a part of the way Baptist churches chose to organize themselves; it was endemic to the nature of religious organization and in no way crossed a full commitment to religious liberty or their activity in seeking "relief for our oppressed brethren." Doctrinal, that is, confessional, conformity within a church manifests the purpose of the church and is a means of promoting it. Seeking agreement on truths of Scripture, in the minds of these Colonial Revolutionary Baptists, in no way violated their equally hot pursuit of religious liberty.

The necessity of union by agreement gave rise to the confession of faith adopted by the Cumberland Baptist Association in Maine in 1818. Six years before the founding of the state convention, while meeting in Portland, the churches constituting that association adopted a confession that had three parts. The first part, consisting of ten articles treated basic theological issues; the second part, consisting of six articles, presented the doctrine of the church, its members, its officers and its ordinances; the third part recommended a church covenant. A short preface showed their view of the importance of the confession:

Whereas union of sentiment in the great principle of Revelation is an important requisite to Christian fellowship, and, whereas union of sentiment cannot appear without knowing the belief of each other, nor our belief be well known without some written statement of it,--
Therefore, according to the usages of our brethren who have gone before us, and of others,
the Cumberland Baptist Association have approved the following articles: ...

Their conviction, therefore, was that cooperation in a mission required union in belief. This did not replace Scripture, but was a manifestation of several leading ideas of the "great principle of Revelation." Also, written form gave a more testable, clear and permanent form than mere hearsay. The written confession inhibited and discouraged (I started to write "eliminated," but such is never the case) the danger of the association's harboring men of heterodox principles that would gradually erode the purity of their churches and their mission. They saw both their doctrine and the practice of making a confession fully harmonious with Baptist precedent.

The Confession of Abraham Booth

The ministerial history of Abraham Booth (1734-1806) provides an excellent example of confessional stewardship in the pastoral calling. Booth, originally a General Baptist and hostile to the doctrines of the Particular Baptists, became convinced that his opposition resulted from erroneous principles, misguided zeal and insufficient grasp of the truth of God's grace. He joined the Particular Baptists and in February

1769, was ordained to the pastorate of Prescott Street Church in London. He continued there for thirty-seven years. At his ordination, his message consisted of a personal confession of his faith. His plain, clearly articulated, profoundly constructed evangelical thought so characteristic of all his valuable writings came through strongly in this confession.

As evidence for the argument of this article, we note that Booth begins his confession with this sentence: "As it has been customary on these solemn occasions, *to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us*; and, as I am now called upon, in this public manner, to make a free and open confession of my religious principles; I would look up to the Father of lights, and the Spirit of truth, that I may be enabled to make *a good profession in the presence of many witnesses*;--in the presence of God, of angels, and of men." He viewed this as a common and healthy practice.

Booth began by affirming that the existence of God clearly may be deduced from the beauty, variety and intelligent design of nature, but that a "more positive and explicit revelation of the perfections and purposes" of God is given in the Bible. Booth gives a lengthy catalogue of evidences compelling in their cumulative effect that draws him to conclude, "I cannot hesitate a single moment to pronounce it a divine revelation, and every way worthy its infinite Author." The Bible alone, therefore, he considers as "the *only rule of my faith and practice*." From that source he presents his confession being persuaded that "the following doctrines are contained in those oracles of eternal truth" and, therefore, are his foundation of hope and source of spiritual joy.

He confesses that there is only one God "possessed of absolute and infinite perfection" whose governance extends to all "his creatures and all their actions." In this single divine he finds that the Bible teaches the eternal co-existence of "three distinct persons," the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

God created all things and with peculiar blessings of light "he created man, and constituted him lord of this lower world." Though man, as male and female, possessed uprightness, innocence and holiness, out of his own free will he transgressed God's command and plunged himself and his posterity into "guilt, depravity, and ruin." All sinned in him and fell with him. Adam as both natural and federal head bequeathed to his posterity "the guilt of his first sin ... and a corrupt nature."

The "unerring word" also teaches that "the eternal Sovereign, before the world began, of his own *good pleasure*, and to manifest the riches of his glorious grace, foreseeing the fall of man, chose a certain number of this apostate race to eternal salvation, whom he *predestinated to the adoption of children by Jesus Christ, according to his own sovereign will*." To accomplish this he entered into a covenant of grace with the Son.

In accordance with this eternal covenant, the Son took to himself our nature in an incarnation, and after a sinless life took our punishment as a vicarious atoning sacrifice. He was buried and after three days the Crucified rose from the dead. This provides the "highest possible evidence, that the debt he became responsible for was perfectly paid--the sins for which he suffered entirely expiated--the divine law and divine justice fully satisfied--the powers of darkness vanquished, and death itself overcome." Also His

resurrection seals the certainty of the resurrection to immortality of His saints. His ascension, session and intercession guarantee the preservation of His people and that their praises and prayers ascend with acceptance before the eternal throne.

The "same sacred canons" teach that justification of sinners comes only by "the righteousness of christ imputed to them" not by any "holy qualities wrought in them, or any works of righteousness performed by them, either with or without the assistance of the Holy Spirit."

Regeneration and consequent holiness of life, nevertheless, are necessary if one is to see the Lord. This regeneration and its fruits of faith and sanctification "are not the produce of man's free-will and power, but the effects of a divine agency by the word of truth." Because of this, those so transformed are kept by God's power to a "certain, infallible perseverance in grace to glory."

Christ has left "various ordinances" for the edification of His people on their earthly pilgrimage. Among these He has left two "positive institutions" that set before us as vivid emblems various aspects of the power and effectuality of the Lord's passion and resurrection. These are baptism and the Lord's Supper. Scripture gives no warrant for baptism of any but those who manifest faith in Christ and make profession of it. Baptism can be in no other form than by immersion. Communion, or the Lord's Supper, which is designed to "impress our minds with a lively sense of the evil of sin--the sufferings of Jesus for it--the benefits derived to us through those sufferings--together with that union and communion which we have with him and one with another" necessarily follows baptism.

Death immediately issues in the souls of saints entering into glory made perfect in holiness while the souls of "the wicked are immediately transmitted into the abode of darkness and despair." At the resurrection, Jesus Christ will appear as Judge and will "make an everlasting separation between the righteous and the wicked; awarding eternal life and infinite happiness to the righteous; but everlasting death and never ending torments to the wicked." Booth continues, "The equity of which sentence on either part, I am fully persuaded, will be admired and applauded by all holy intelligences; and acknowledged even by the damned themselves to their aggravated woe."

In closing, Booth declared that these proposition not only were the leading articles of his faith but the abiding sentiments of his heart. He had experienced the "powerful, comforting, sanctifying influence" of these truths on his soul. He did not pretend to infallibility of judgment or to know all that is to be known in this present imperfect state. His mind, so he professed, stood "open to conviction, and susceptible of truth, by whatever means it may please God to inform me of it." As he had in the past, he would communicate these advances or changes "to others as cases and circumstances may require." With that well-conceived and justly humble caveat, Booth nevertheless professed before his ministerial peers and his church, "Such also are the doctrines I am determined, by divine assistance, to preach, and to make the important subjects of my future ministrations."

A Historical Judgment

Though it would be impossible to demonstrate that no exceptions exist to this procedure, one may easily and fairly conclude that confessional agreement between pastor and people was alive and well in Baptist churches and associations from the earliest days of modern Baptist witness. Any effort to represent high confessional expectations as contradictory, or even anomalous, to Baptist witness must be seen as unfounded by critical historical inquiry. Baptists were people of good common sense and profound commitment to biblical truth and witness and they did not think that God's glory and purpose thrived in the matrix of doctrinal obscurantism, minimalism or agnosticism. Doctrinal confession, expression and agreement served as balm to their wounds, health to their souls and constant nourishment for their corporate witness to the world.



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The Confessional Convictions of Spencer Cone

Tom J. Nettles

A forthcoming book on Spencer Cone (1785-1855) by John Thornbury, (published jointly by Evangelical Press in England and Founders Press in the United States), uncovers some treasures of Baptist life. Cone, long a prominent figure in Baptist life, served churches in Alexandria, Virginia, Oliver Street Baptist Church in New York, and First Baptist New York. He served as chaplain of the House of Representatives 1815-16. After seven years at Alexandria, he spent eighteen years at the Oliver Street church. The rest of his life he spent at the First Baptist Church. Cathcart states that for many years, Cone "was the most active Baptist minister in the United States, and the most popular clergyman in America." Baptists granted him "every position of honor which his brethren could give him." Before he accepted the call to Oliver Street church he sent them the following abstract of doctrinal beliefs. He wanted to be sure that the church fully adhered to these biblical doctrines, would expect that he would preach and teach with these views in mind, and that they together would prosecute a ministry to the glory of God believing that these items of faith most truly constituted their missionary message.

In view of our anticipated relationship, it becomes me to specify the leading tenets of that ministry which I profess to have received of the Lord Jesus. It is then, brethren, my aim and prayer, through grace divine, inviolably to maintain, and faithfully and affectionately to preach, the following doctrines--viz:

The unity of God; the existence of three equal persons in the Godhead; the just condemnation and total depravity of all mankind by the fall of our first parents; eternal, personal, and unconditional election; the proper and essential deity of the Lord Jesus Christ; the indispensable necessity of His atonement and its special relationship to the sins of His people; justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ alone; effectual calling by the irresistible operation of the Holy Spirit; the perseverance of the saints; believers baptism by immersion only; the Lord's Supper a privilege peculiar to baptized believers regularly received into the fellowship of the church; the resurrection of the body; the general judgment; the everlasting happiness of the saints, and the interminable misery of the finally impenitent; the obligation of every intelligent creature to love God supremely, to believe what God says, and to practise what God commands and the divine inspiration of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, as the infallible rule of faith and practice.

On leaving Oliver Street, Cone moved to the First Baptist Church of New York City. The church had been established in 1745. Cone observed that the theological position of the church remained consistent through the years as confirmed clearly in the first book of records. The separate doctrines enunciated in that record, however, had no discreet scriptural texts set forth prominently. Cone led the church, therefore, to produce a confession with each article numbered and providing biblical texts in support of

each article of faith. Cone states that the following articles "were unanimously adopted" in a regular "Church Meeting" on July 28, 1841 and were printed in that year in New York by John Gray.

Article Nine of the Church covenant appended to this confession of faith states: "We agree that it is expedient that all persons who may hereafter propose to unite with us, should give their assent to the Summary of Faith and Practice, and the Articles of this Church Covenant, before their admission."

1. We receive the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as being ALL GIVEN BY INSPIRATION OF GOD; and as containing the only authorized RULE of our faith and practice. 2 Tim. Iii.16. 2 Pet. I.21. Isa. Xxxiv.16. John v. 39. Acts xvii. 11. 1 Pet. Iv. 11. Isa. Viii. 20. Ps. Cxix. 105. Prov. Xiii. 13. John viii. 31.

2. According to these Holy Oracles, we believe that there is ONE, and but ONE LIVING AND TRUE GOD, who subsisteth in THREE EQUAL PERSONS, the FATHER, the SON, and the HOLY SPIRIT. Deut. Vi. 4. Mark xii. 29. Eph. Iv. 6. 1 Tim. Ii. 5. Exod. Xx. 3-5. Gen. I. 26. Isa. Xlviii. 16. Matt. Xxviii. 19. 1 John v. 7. 2 Cor. Xiii. 14. Heb. I. 3. Isa. Ix. 6. John i. 1. Isa. Xlvi. 9. John x. 30.

3. That God is clearly revealed, as to his BEING and PERFECTIONS, both by HIS WORKS and in HIS WORD; yet, that with respect to his essence, mode of Existence, and manner of operation, He is incomprehensible to all but himself. Rom i. 20. Ps. Xix. 1-3. Job xi. 7-9. Isa xl. 28. Isa xlv. 15.

4. That God alone created the heavens and the Earth, with all their inhabitants and appurtenances, whether visible or invisible. Ps. Xxxiii. 6-9. Gen. I. 1. Acts xvii. 24-26. Gen. Ii. 1. Ps. Viii. 3. Ps. Civ. 24. John i.3. Col. I. 16.

5. That God made man upright, and able to keep the Law under which He placed him; but that man, being left to the freedom of his own will, transgressed that Law, and thereby fell into a state of moral depravity and legal condemnation. Gen. I. 26. Eccl. Vii. 29. Gen i. 31. Ps. Viii. 5. Gen. V. 1. Gen. Iii. 7. Isa. I.5. Ps. Xiv. 3. John iii. 18. Rom. V. 12. 18. Isa. Xliii. 27. Rom. I. 28-32.

6. That the first man, Adam, was constituted, by divine appointment, a public head and representative of all his posterity; and consequently when he fell, they all fell with him into the same condition. Rom. V. 14. 12. 19. 1 Cor. Xv. 22, 48, 49. Gen. V. 3. Job xiv. 4.

7. That all mankind, by nature, are totally and universally depraved, and therefore without either ability or inclination to return to God, or to render perfect obedience to his moral requirements. Ps. Liii. 3. Rom. Iii. 9-20. Prov. Xx. 9. Josh. Xxiv. 19. Jer. Xiii.23. John v. 40. Jer. Ii. 22. John vi. 44. 65. Eph ii. 3.

8. That notwithstanding these deplorable facts, whereas Adam, by his own personal transgression, lost

his ability to keep the Law under which he was; and whereas the disability, as well as the disinclination of his posterity to keep this Law, arises from their personal depravity; it evidently follows, that their obligations to render a perfect obedience to all God's commandments, remain undiminished; and consequently that the penal curse threatened against every delinquent is strictly righteous.
Gen. Iii. 16, 17. Job xxi. 14. Gen. Vi. 5. Deut. Vi. 5. Luke x. 25-28. Gal. Iii. 10. Rom. Ii. 2-15.

9. We believe in the indispensable necessity of the ATONEMENT OF CHRIST, and its special relationship to the sins of his people.

Luke xxiv. 26. Rom. Viii. 3. Isa. Liii. 10, 11. Lev. Xvi. 30. Heb. Ix. 22. Matt. I. 21. John x. 11. Heb. X. 10. 1 Pet. 1. 18, 19. Luke i. 68. Rev. v. 9. Eph. I. 7. Rev. xiv. 4. Tit. Ii. 14. Rev. vii. 14-17. Isa. Li. 11. 1Cor. I. 30. Gal. I. 4. 1 Cor. Xv. 3.

10. That God, in pardoning and justifying any of the fallen race of mankind, has no respect to any supposed good works to be done by them, either before or after regeneration; but alone to the obedience and sacrifice of Christ, which God the Father, by an act of his mere grace, imputes to all that believe, as the only meritorious cause of their pardon and justification.

Ex. Xxxvi. 31, 32. Luke xvii. 10. Rom. Iii. 9-28. Iv. 4-8, 16, 23-25. Eph. Ii. 1-10. Isa. Xliii. 25. Jer. Xxxiii. 6. Rom. Iii. 21-28. Iv. 3-6. 23-25. V. 19-21. Acts xiii. 39. Xviii. 27.

11. That no works performed by any, prior to their regeneration and faith in Christ, are spiritually good; yet morality and benevolence are to be enjoined on all, as required by the Law of God, and as useful in society; and that believers especially are to be careful to maintain good works, as the fruits and evidences of their gracious state; as the means of their usefulness in the church and in the world; and by which they show forth the praises of Him who hath called them out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Rom. Viii. 7, 8. Heb. Xi. 6. Isa. I. 16, 17. Ez. Ii. 3-5. Luke x. 27. Eph. Ii. 10. Titus ii. 11-14. Iii. 8. Philemon 5-7. Matt. Vii. 16. Gal. Vi. 10. Heb. Xiii. 16. 1 Pet. Ii. 9. Matt. V. 16.

12. That the Gospel of the grace of God, revealing his method of saving lost sinners, through the incarnation, obedience, and death of Christ, is to be preached to mankind in common; but that regeneration, and therefore repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, which are essential not only to salvation but to the performance of his acceptable service; as also every requisite to secure perseverance in grace to glory, (which is certain of all the regenerate;--are sovereignly bestowed according to God's eternal and personal election of his people in Christ, through whom He gives his Holy Spirit to them, for their effectual calling, sanctification, and preservation unto eternal life.

Acts xx. 24. 2 Tim. I. 10. 2 Cor. Iv. 6. Gen. Iii. 15. Isa. Vii. 14. Matt. I. 21. V. 17. 1 Pet. Iii. 18. Matt. Xxviii. 19. Mark xvi. 15. Luke xxiv. 47. Col. I. 28. Acts. Xxi. 21. Xxvi. 18. Rom. V. 1. Heb. Xi. 6. Rom viii. 8, 17, 30. John x. 21-29. Acts xiii. 48. Eph. I. 3, 4. 1 Thes. V. 9. 2 Tim. I. 9. Tit. Iii. 5-7. Eph. Iv. 30. Rom. Viii. 11.

13. That although the Holy Spirit as to his testimony in the Scriptures and in the ministry of the word, is constantly resisted by the unregenerate, as He was by the Jews as to his testimony by the prophets and apostles; yet, that in his regenerating operations He is always invincible and infallible.

Acts vii. 51. Neh. ix. 30. Zech. vii. 11. Eph. ii. 1, 4, 5. Philip. I. 6. Rom. viii. 14. 2 Cor. iii. 17.

14. Moreover, in regard to the future state, we believe that according to the Scriptures there will be a personal resurrection both of the just and unjust; and that besides an individual judgment that passes upon every soul on its separation from the body, there will be a general judgment, when an eternal separation will be made between the righteous and the wicked;--the righteous being received to everlasting happiness, and the wicked being consigned to everlasting misery.

Dan. xii. 1-3. John v. 28, 29. Acts xxiv. 15. Luke xvi. 22, 23. xxiii. 43. Heb. ix. 27. Acts xvii. 31. Rom. xiv. 10. 2 Cor. v. 10. Rev. xx. 11-15. Matt. xxv. 31-46. 2 Thess. I. 6-10. 1 Cor. xv. 4, 16, 20, 49. Luke xxiii. 43.

15. Nor would we presume to form our views of the church and ordinances of Christ by any other light than that of the same inspired oracles: and judging by these infallible records, we believe that the kingdom of Christ is not of this world; that the gospel church, therefore, is neither national nor parochial, and that none belong to her by virtue of their natural descent from her members. A visible Gospel Church should consist of such persons only as make a credible profession of faith in Christ, receive his gospel and obey his precepts.

John xviii. 36. Isa. liv. 5, 13. Eph. v. 32. Isa. lix. 21. Acts ii. 47. 1 Cor. I. 1, 2. Col. iv. 15. Acts ix. 31.

16. We believe that every gospel church, regularly constituted, is a society independent of every other ecclesiastical body; having a scriptural authority and directory to govern itself; to choose and remove its own officers, and to discipline its own members.

Matt. xviii. 15-17. Rom. xiv. 1. 1 Cor. v. 11-13. Acts vi. 3-5. 1 John iv. 1. Acts xiv. 23.

17. That the only Officers belonging to organized gospel churches, are Bishops and Deacons.

Philip. I. 1. 1 Tim. iii. 1-13. Acts xiv. 23. xx. 17, 28.

18. The only symbolic ordinances appertaining to the gospel dispensation, are *Baptism* and the *Lord's Supper*: that nothing is a scriptural administration of baptism, but a total immersion of the subject in water, in the *Name of the Holy Trinity*, by a man duly authorized to administer gospel ordinances. We also believe that subjection to baptism is prerequisite to admission into a visible church, and therefore, to partaking of the Lord's Supper; which is to be received only by members of a visible church, and by them only *when come together* in a church capacity.

Matt. xxviii. 19, 20. Acts ii. 41, 42. Matt. xxvi. 26-28. 1 Cor. xi. 33, 34. Acts xx. 7.

19. We believe that the first day of the week is emphatically the LORD'S DAY; and that it becometh us, laying aside ordinary labour and recreation, to hail every return of this day with Christian gladness, and to spend the hours of it in such devotional exercises, private, domestic, and public, as God may afford us opportunity and ability to perform; excepting only such works of necessity and mercy as the events of Providence may dictate or require.

Heb. iv. 3, 9. Col. ii. 16, 17. John xx. 19-26. Rev. i. 10. Acts xx. 7. 1 Cor. xvi. 2.

20. We believe, moreover, that the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, is divinely enjoined, and when religiously performed is well pleasing to God. And though we are assured that none but the regenerate sing with the spirit and with the understanding, we nevertheless believe that mankind in common, as they are constantly receiving various mercies and blessings from God, are bound to celebrate his praise; and, therefore, that they should be allowed and encouraged to join in this part of public worship.

Eph. V. 19. Col. Iii. 16. Heb. Xiii. 15, 16. 1 Cor. Xiv. 15. Ps. XXiv. 1, 2. Ps. Cvii. 8, 21, 31. Acts. Xvii. 24-29. Rom. I. 20, 21. Ps. Cxlv. 4, 10.

Spencer Cone and the churches he served understood the stewardship given them by God to involve a mutual confession of truth. Their lives together as God's people and their witness to the world received definition by these confessions and served to bring unity and clear purpose. Far from being a fetter and intruding on Christian freedom, the confession was seen as an instrument to be used for His honor and glory in promoting the freedom that Christ gave them.



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Book Review

Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, 1707-1807, ed. A. D. Gillette published originally Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1851. New printing, Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2002. Designated as a Tricentennial Edition edited by Terry Wolever. Includes expanded and new indices; 546 pp. plus xxiv pp. of preface materials. ISBN 1-888514-14-0.

Reviewed by [Tom J. Nettles](#)

Baptists of all persuasions should welcome this beautiful volume. The external dimensions are seven inches by ten and one-fourth inches. The gold stamping on the cover and the spine is tastefully done and designates the volume as a part of "The Philadelphia Association Series." The text block is sewn and the headbands contribute aesthetically to the appearance as a blue and white checkerboard pattern. The endsheets continue the color theme with a rich marbled blue and white appearance. The paper is acid free and the print is friendly.

Content features especially prepared for this edition include several helpful tools. A detailed Table of Contents gives a quick view of the chronological development of issues at the associational meetings. Other preface material include an introduction by Terry Wolever, a short glossary of terms, maps and lists of the constituting churches for 1757 and 1807. The middle of the book, between 198-199, contains eight pages of high quality glossy paper with photographs and engravings of people, churches and artifacts. The indices include a massive index of persons (469-494) with more than 1200 names. An index of churches mentioned in the *Minutes* is equally exhaustive and helpful. The subject index covers pages 505-536 and a Scripture index filling double-column pages covers from 537-545. Another small index lists biblical persons mentioned in the *Minutes*. I have tested the usefulness of these indices. They make the book very accessible for research.

Even apart from these added attractions, the *Minutes of the Philadelphia Association* is a volume every Baptist should have. Its churches were heirs to a matured Baptist theology and ecclesiology; the *Minutes* show its growth and theological stability for a century and how these theological ideas played their role in the lives of the churches. The doctrinal consistency from the earliest years and throughout the century makes an impressive and encouraging challenge to the insecure, minimalistic theological scene of today. When enlightenment rationalism bullied its way into American colleges and many American pulpits, William Staughton, in 1800, would acknowledge that they lived "in an age when thousands are treating the doctrines we maintain as unintelligible, and the duties we practice as irrational." Nevertheless, the congruity between the human mind, the realities of nature and the Spirit's working provided unassailable evidence that "He who formed the mind is the author and finisher of our faith." Not to any "fancied internal light, any capricious impulses, which may be supposed to supersede the necessity of scriptural instruction" did he point them, but to the "operations of sovereign grace, which include the regeneration and sanctifying of the heart, strong consolation in trouble, and lively hopes in death" (352). In 1804,

Burgiss Allison could remind the churches, important are the doctrines of grace with which it behooves you to be acquainted; various are the divine truths necessary to be exhibited to the Christian's view, and many are the duties requisite to be inculcated and warmly recommended to practice." He expressed the persistent intent of the association, under the unerring leadership of the Spirit of wisdom, to be that "we should press one and another of those doctrines and duties upon your notice, that we may stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance" (397). William White, in 1803 could speak confidently of the "Calvinistic scheme, (which we believe to be founded on the word of God,)" and exhort his hearers to "become exemplary for purity of doctrine, zeal in his service, and uprightness in your lives" (384, 391). The final circular letter in the volume, William Staughton's presentation of the qualifications for gospel ministry, urged a knowledge of "the doctrines of grace, and of the 'law of the house of the Lord.'" The *Century Sermon*, preached by Samuel Jones in 1807, contained his admission that a historical presentation of this sort is "dry" and falls short of requiring the fervency, devotion and pathos which divine truths "not only allow, but require." He then set forth a catena of doctrinal subjects that would inflame passion within both speaker and hearer:

To speak of the deplorable state of man under the wrath of God, and the sentence of condemnation; to display the unsearchable riches of the grace and love of God in the way of recovery and salvation through Jesus Christ; to describe the work of the Spirit in taking the things of Christ and showing them unto us, his work of conversion and sanctification; to paint the awful process in the great day, and finally the irrecoverable perdition of the ungodly, and the glory and felicity of the righteous; these are subjects that will admit, and even call for animation. Here the preacher may well glow with ardor, and the hearer feel an interest. These subjects, when accompanied with divine power, will melt the affections, bow the will, and mend the heart.

For one hundred years the Philadelphia Association had maintained a stable consistent witness to the truths originally present in the founding churches. This phenomenon most likely is explained by the operations of confessional theology in the association. The charting of this provides another interesting aspect of this volume. The first mention of the confession comes in 1724 on a query concerning the fourth commandment, "whether changed, altered, or diminished." The answer states, "We refer to the Confession of faith, set forth by the elders and brethren met in London, 1689, and owned by us" This answer indicates that the confession already operated as a doctrinal guideline for the Association at that time. Again, in 1727, the Confession of Faith is referenced on a question concerning marriage. A query concerning church membership in 1735 was answered by referring to the Confession of Faith, chapter xxvii. In 1742, the Association voted to reprint the Confession and annex a short treatise on church discipline to it. The next year, 1743, an event occurred which gives a clear example as to how seriously the Association took their confessional arrangement. Was the Confession merely descriptive or did they consider it prescriptive for those professing to be in good standing in any of the churches of the Association? Consider the following narrative.

Tuesday, the house met according to appointment, at 8 o'clock, A. M., to consider further the affair begun yesterday, touching the differences at Montgomery. After some time spent in debate thereon, brother Joseph Eaton stood up, and freely, to our apprehension,

recanted, renounced, and condemned all expressions, which he heretofore had used, whereby his brethren at Montgomery, or any persons elsewhere, were made to believe that he departed from the literal sense and meaning of that fundamental article in our Confession of faith, concerning the eternal generation and Sonship of Jesus Christ our Lord; he acknowledged with grief his misconduct therein, whether by word or deed. We desire that all our churches would take notice thereof, and have a tender regard for him in his weak and aged years, and in particular, of that great truth upon which the Christian religion depends; without which it must not only totter, but fall to the ground; which he confesses he was sometimes doubtful of. Our brother Butler, gave his acknowledgment, written in his own hand, in the following words:--"I freely confess that I have given too much cause for others to judge that I contradicted our Confession of faith, concerning the eternal generation of the Son of God, in some expressions contained in my paper, which I now with freedom condemn, and am sorry for my so doing, and for every other misconduct that I have been guilty of, from first to last, touching the said article, or any other matter" (47, 48).

Requiring public repentance by written statement and oral confession concerning divergence from an article in the Confession of faith seems to be very close to a prescriptive use of the confession as regards the terms on which the churches were united. It is prescriptive, however, not because the Confession holds independent authority, but in its relationship to the arrangement of biblical revelation. In reading the *Minutes*, one does not receive the impression that the Confession rose to the level of an authority. The members of the Association argued for, and conducted themselves throughout, as persons under the sole authority of Scripture. The Confession, however, gave prominence to leading doctrines of the Bible around which a constellation of other biblical teaching revolved. A denial of the Confession equaled a denial of a clear biblical truth distilled from many places in Scripture and upon which many other teachings depended. In this particular case, "the Eternal Generation of the Son" has such prominence in their thinking that they called it "that great truth upon which the Christian religion depends; without which it must not only totter, but fall to the ground." The biblical material that leads to a doctrine of the Trinity demands an eternal Father/Son relationship which also makes necessary the personhood and deity of the Holy Spirit. To deny the eternal generation of the Son meant throwing away the doctrine of the Trinity and rearranging all the Scriptures that lead inevitably to that teaching. In addition, this would severely compromise the concept of the eternal covenant, the nature of the incarnation, the atonement, justification by faith, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, sanctification and mortification of the flesh by the Spirit, the efficacy of the Father's electing grace in committing to the Son the work of redemption for the elect, the sealing of this work to the elect by the Spirit, and a host of other biblical nuances that depend on an attitude of reverence and worship for the Holy Triune God.

The denial of the article involves much more than just neutering a complex concept. One cannot reject a doctrine as unessential to Christian faith solely because it seems on the surface to be too complex, too metaphysical, beyond the capacities of a mere child. Many truths, in fact most truths, about God are so, and the most mature know that they are but children in the presence of God. With no embarrassment and with undiminished faith, Christians confess that large portions of divine revelation, which is given us for our understanding, exceed our present understanding and will challenge our highest spiritual and mental

capacities as long as we are in this world. Much can be understood, however, and that which in our present state of perception seems to probe the deepest into the eternal essence we should be loath to relinquish.

Baptists of the Philadelphia Association believed that the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son held such a status in the system of God's gracious revelation. Relationships within the Godhead as revealed in Scripture demanded it. They had no desire to go beyond Scripture, but every instinct of their piety demanded that they leave no biblical truth as a matter to be negotiated away. Denial of eternal generation questions the whole foundation of revealed truth and eternal redemption as well as "the foundation of all our Communion with God, and comfortable dependence on him" (Confession II, 3).

The *Minutes* give us even more on this issue of confessions and serve as their own explanation of the importance of this doctrinal recantation for the peace and unity of the brethren and churches. In October, 1773, Abel Morgan proposed that the general letter to the churches consist of "observations and improvements of some particular article of faith, contained in our Confession, beginning with the first, and so on in order, unless occasion require the contrary" (136). This information appeared in the records for May, 1774, as an explanation for Morgan's circular letter on article one on the Holy Scriptures. In October, 1774, Samuel Jones wrote an exposition of article two entitled "Of God and of the Holy Trinity." Jones affirms the wording of the confession and sets out "to remove some difficulties attending it, so far as the mysteriousness of the subject will admit." When he arrives at the point of exploring the relationship between the Father and the Son, Jones writes "It remains, then, that he was the only begotten Son of God by eternal generation. After listing several supportive biblical passages, he proposes the question, "If he was the Son of God by generation as to his divine nature, how could he be co-equal and co-eternal with the Father?" His answer dipped into historic analogies and arguments by affirming that of necessity father and son must exist simultaneously, even as mind and thought, or sun and light. The relationship in these is not of temporal priority but of consequential priority, order of nature. "As the Father exists a Father from eternity, so does the Son a Son." Humble recognition of both revelation and continuing mystery must color our treatment of this subject.

Thus, dearly beloved, we have endeavored to set before you this essential article of our faith in as clear a manner as the narrowness of our limits, and the mysteriousness of the subject, would permit. But let no one presume to think that he can by searching, find out the Almighty to perfection, nor vainly inquire where the Lord has not revealed. Let us rather be humbly thankful, that the Divine Majesty has condescended to make such wondrous discoveries of his being and perfections.

Expositions of the Confession of Faith continued through article XXII in 1798 after which the designated ministers addressed a series of special subjects. A compilation of these letters, synthesized with other selections from the *Minutes*, would make a highly useful body of divinity. A large number of other letters contains rich and affectionate pastoral advice and admonition and provides a worthy exercise in edifying and devotional reading.

Quite helpful also is the first-hand look at the operation of Baptists during the years prior to the Revolutionary War and during the early days of the new nation. Particularly in the '60's and '70's do we find mention of petitions for relief of persecution and civil disabilities placed on dissenters, especially Baptists, in the colonies where established churches pursued their favored status with repressive zeal. A committee of grievances was appointed in 1774 to cooperate in relief efforts to oppressed Baptists and to aid in petitioning for relief. Subsequent to the Revolutionary War, numbers of statements about the blessings and opportunities of religious liberty checker the narrative. The Circular Letter for 1797 concerns "Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience." Thomas Memminger, after a sparkling exposition of Christian liberty and its concomitant implications for a call to holiness and truth, gives one paragraph to liberty of conscience but is mainly interested in the liberty Christians have to be free from all "commandments, doctrines, or ordinances, unless founded upon, consistent with, and springing out of his word, which alone is truth" (329). The Century Sermon contained some observations on the state of religious liberty and remarked, "Having been persecuted and oppressed, suffered imprisonment and alienation of property; it is but reasonable to expect, we should be very jealous of our religious liberty, which indeed is the case." Persecution for cause of conscience is "so horrible: to invade the rights of the Deity, to compel people to obey man rather than God, to do what they verily believe they ought not, and to pay for what they never had, nor wish to have; every feeling of the moral sense, to go no farther, rises against it" (461).

Some of the most interesting statements about religious liberty concern its impact on the sincerity and success of the rising interest in missions. These *Minutes* give a highly interesting insight into the missionary impulse of these Baptists. Even before Carey and company arose, and before the arrival of William Staughton, who was a student that attended the organizational meeting of the Society, the missionary zeal of these Regular Baptists is clear. In 1773, having benefited from the visitation of several ministers from the Philadelphia Association, the Quekuky (Kehukee) Association in North Carolina solicited "the continuance of correspondence and missions." In that same year, "the usefulness of a travelling minister on this continent appearing more manifest by trials," the Association appointed John Gano as a "messenger of the churches" and voted to defray his expenses, twelve pounds as he reported the next year. In 1799 they proposed a general conference composed of Baptists from all the associations "as may seem most subservient to the general interests of our Lord's kingdom" (343). The next year, they accepted a proposal "to invite the general committee of Virginia and different Associations on the continent, to unite with us in laying a plan for forming a missionary society, and establishing a fund for its support, and for employing missionaries among the natives of our continent" (350). In 1801, after reading letters from Carey at Serampore and Dawes among the Hottentots the note was made, "This Association exult in every prospect of the success of the gospel, and wish the missionaries God speed" (360). The Circular Letter of that year gave an intriguing view of the relation of missions to those churches that had no political power vested in their advancement. Baptist growth in the newly formed nation demonstrated this. The exponential increase in Baptist churches showed that "the sovereignty of God in this progress of gospel truth is great, teaching us that Christ's kingdom needs no support from union with the governments of this world; that the more distinctly the line is drawn between them the better." (363). The lack of connection that Baptists have with governmental power makes their missionary success more likely and thus their obligation greater.

William Rogers constructed the circular letter for 1806 on the subject of missions. His first point expanded several principles on which missions proceed: a deep conviction of the fallen nature of man, the total inability of all persons to save themselves, in Christ is the fullness of salvation that sinners need, the knowledge of the Lord will fill the earth, and the work is to be effected by the ministry of the Word. His second point gave a history of missions from the apostolic age to the present. Rogers mentioned every example at his disposal, including Jesuit missions, the fourteen missionaries that went from Geneva to America, with the most prominent example coming from the English Baptists, Carey, Marshman, and Ward. "We wish them every one success, so far as truth is maintained," Rogers wrote, "In the name of the Lord God of Sabaoth!" The final point held forth the promise of success. When it will happen, we don't know; but that it will happen is certain. "The object of the missionary societies, beloved brethren, is great. greater [sic] indeed than the Reformation itself." The reformation aimed to overthrow the beast. Missions aims to destroy the dragon, "from whom the beast derived its power. The season may soon come when,

Europe and Asia shall resound,
With Africa, his fame;
And thou! America, in songs
Redeeming love proclaim.

Many other interesting ideas could be mentioned that are in the pages of the *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association*. The use of catechisms, the nature of church discipline, the theory of associations, biographical material and personal theologies all have an abundance of raw material in these pages.

Both form and content make this a compelling book to purchase and own. It will wear out neither on the outside or the inside. A careful study shows that confessions, Calvinism, religious liberty and missions live happily together and nurture one another when rightly held and practiced with a view to the exaltation of the divine glory.



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