

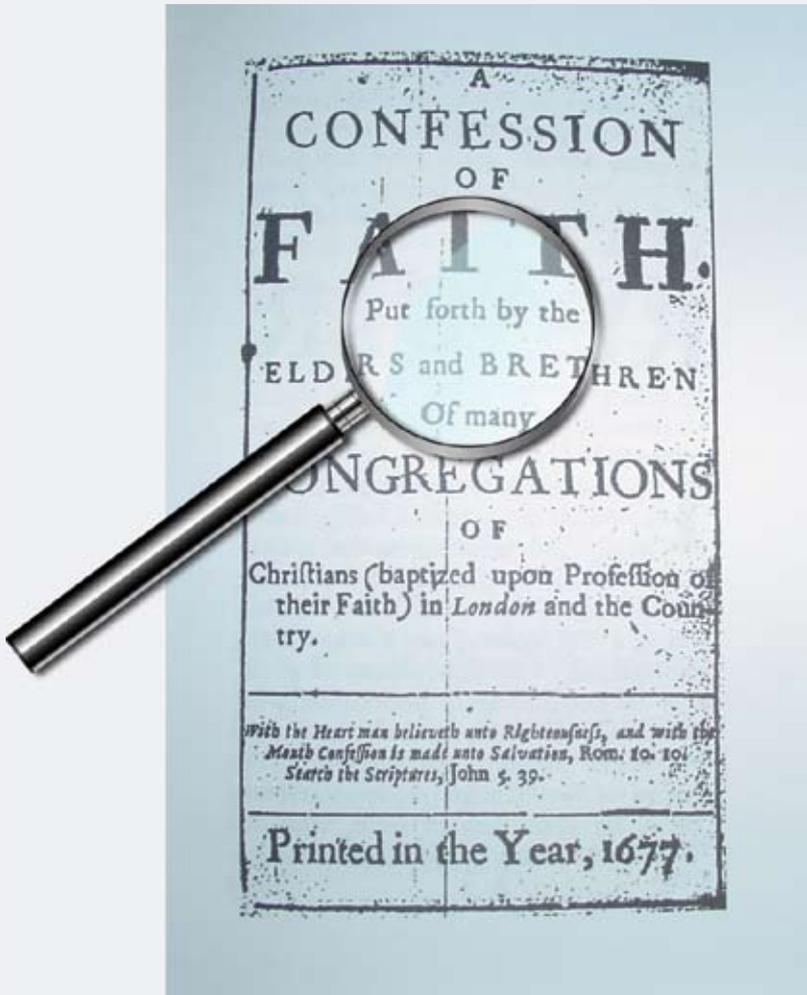
The Founders Journal



Committed to historic Baptist principles

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The Founders Journal



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Finding the Richest Confessional Treasure

Tom J. Nettles

The Baptists that exist today have a heritage of defining themselves by confessions of faith. Not only has definition been at stake, but the beauty and purity of the local church. At times, some Baptists mistook the principle of religious authority, or formal principle, residing in *sola scriptura*, for the material principle of doctrinal definition. Definition arises from authority; authority remains a mere abstraction unless definition proceeds from it. Definition fritters away into vapor unless it reflects, fosters and fertilizes reality.

Notice that I said “Baptists that exist today” have the confessional heritage. “That is not so,” some would argue, and their statement would seem historically plausible. Numerous examples they would cite of those that sought to maintain Baptist life without confessions. I would counter, “Those groups ceased to exist and for the most part have no true historical heirs.” Each generation gives rise to reconstructed ideological heirs but they soon cease to be Baptist, or even Christian. They leave behind them only documents of dissent from truth but fail to perpetuate a viable Baptist witness into future generations.

Graveyards of non-confessionalists form a stern silhouette on the Baptist horizon. For example, a controversy over the Trinity and the deity of Christ in 1719 led to a meeting in Salters Hall in London. Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Baptists met together to give advice to the churches of Devonshire and Somerset over this controversy. Thirty-nine of the 110 ministers who met were Baptists. When one group suggested that a composite confessional statement serve as a test of orthodoxy, others objected. Among those advocating non-subscription to the confessional test were fourteen General Baptists and two Particular Baptists. The Baptists that advocated subscription included fourteen Particular Baptists and one General Baptist.

John Gale expressed the opinion of the non-subscribers when he preached, “Away then with all human forms and compositions, with all decrees and determinations of councils and synods, with all confessions and subscriptions; ...let every pious Christian embrace and subscribe only that most valuable form of sound words contain'd in the scriptures.” No evangelical Christian disagrees with the desire to have every doctrine supported by the clear words of Scripture. To assert that desire accompanied by a denigration of the value of confessions, however, often cloaks a disbelief of vital doctrine more than it affirms a belief of Scripture.

Joseph Stennet, though not at the Salters Hall meeting, knew of the controversy and its outcome. In 1738, he spoke for the subscribers when he argued

that Scripture warranted “us to make a public and explicite confession, as proper occasion offers of every doctrine which we believe to be contained in the word of God.” Without such a confession, separation from the ranks of heresy is impossible. He observed that the non-subscribers of twenty years earlier had degenerated to the point that they no longer held to the uniqueness of divine revelation but subjected it to the “light of nature.” By 1812, Joseph Ivimey observed that the churches of the non-subscribers at Salters Hall had all become either extinct or Socinian.

The authoritative revelation, therefore, invites, even requires, that its adherents confess their understanding of its teaching and their heartfelt joy in submission to its truths. The question naturally emerges as to what confession most clearly, fully, and accurately expresses the whole of this divine revelation. This issue of the *Founders Journal* investigates the usefulness of two highly influential confessions in Baptist history, the New Hampshire Confession (NHC) and the Second London Confession (SLC).

The viewpoints expressed here come from brethren that are like-minded on a large number of important issues concerning doctrine, preaching, holiness and church reform. Not only are they like-minded, they all are deeply involved in doing something about it. Likewise, this discussion does not call into question the confessional heritage of Baptists. All agree with both confessions discussed here and agree that the use of a confession is good for the churches. We are back, therefore, to the question proposed above: “What confession most clearly, fully and accurately expresses the whole of this divine revelation?” We also are dealing with a subsidiary question of a more pragmatic nature: “What confession serves the church in achieving the goals of spiritual unity and growth in the truth?”

This discussion was prompted by an article by Shawn Wright on the 9Marks website in which he advocated the NHC and argued that the SLC did not serve these purposes as well. Mark Dever, along with Wright a firm believer in the SLC, defends the position that Wright has taken. As many know, Dever has several years of meaningful church reform using the NHC. His experience illustrates the usefulness of a confessional approach and specifically the success with which the NHC can be employed. Likewise, Sam Waldron argues for the superior usefulness of the SLC and has both current and past experience to add strength to his position. Sam also has written a very helpful book entitled *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* published by Evangelical Press. As an illustration of the doctrinal power of the details of the SLC, Phil Newton provides an excellent doctrinal and pastorally sensitive exposition of three paragraphs of Chapter 8 “Of Christ the Mediator” from that confession. Tom Ascol adds his approval of the SLC by showing its usefulness in reforming an existing church in the SBC.

Sometimes a confession must be changed by enlargement, clarification, or deletion. Since the SLC was written (1677/89) before the hyper-Calvinist controversy (1707ff) and the beginning of the modern missions movement (1792), it has nothing that addresses directly those issues in Baptist thought. Chapter 20 “Of the Gospel, and of the extent of the Grace thereof” offers the greatest possibility for addressing the subject. As it is, it represents an original attempt on the part of the Particular Baptists to speak to the relation of gospel proclamation and God’s purpose for all the nations. The Westminster Confession contains

no such chapter. We present, therefore, a suggested enlargement of that article along with the rationale and principles that governed the enlargements and other amendments.

The Second London Confession will be referred to from time to time as the SLC, the 1689 and the 2LC.

We pray that God will prompt each reader to embrace truth as his personal stewardship and in so doing will investigate how the responsible use of a historic confession can help fulfill the Bible's mandate to "hold fast the form of sound words" (2 Timothy 1:13). ☞

News

New on the Founders Ministries Website

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Read commentary and observations from Tom Ascol, Executive Director.

<http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/blog/>

Sunday School Teacher Helps for LifeWay Sunday School curricula

Now available for both *Explore the Bible* and *Family Bible Study*

Teacher helps for the *Family Bible Study* are written by Mark Dunn, THM, member of Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, Florida.

Explore the Bible helps are written by Dr. Sam Tullock, Pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church, Wylie, Texas, and a professor in the History Department at Collin County Community College in Plano, Texas.

<http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/ss/>

What Is the Gospel?

Founders Ministries is sponsoring a conference November 10–11, 2005 in the Tampa, Florida area. Speakers include Tom Ascol, Fred Malone, Roy Hargrave, Steve Kreloff and David Wooten. The conference will address foundational questions such as: "What is the Gospel?", "What is Evangelism?", "What is Preaching?", "What is the Church?", "What is Salvation?" and "What is Christianity?" It will conclude with a concert by Grammy Award winning musician, Steve Camp. The conference will be hosted by Lakeside Community Chapel in Clearwater, Florida.

For more information, call (877) 753-3341

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Which Confession?

Mark Dever

This article considers the question *What confession of faith is best for a congregation to use as a basis for membership?* It has been occasioned by an article by Shawn Wright in the *9Marks e-newsletter* in which Shawn concludes that the 1689 Confession is not the best confession for a congregation to use. While I agree with many of Shawn's points (as you'll see in this article) I regret needless division over this. I love and appreciate the 1689 Confession, and the sister churches who use it; and I would not want to discourage them in their God-glorifying work in any way. This is a discussion which should be had between brothers, and in a way which encourages us all to get on with the work according to the best light we have.

My Discovery

When, in the autumn of 1994, I was first handed the original set of minutes for our congregation, I was excited! I had in my hands the actual volume in which a brother 116 years earlier recorded the congregation's first acts. I admit that I was nervous as I considered the consequences for opening and reading this book.

Let me back up. I was the new pastor of the then-called Capitol Hill Metropolitan Baptist Church (now Capitol Hill Baptist Church) in Washington, DC. The congregation had enjoyed the privilege of having faithful, Bible-believing pastors preaching to them throughout their history. Over the previous year and a half I had met with members of the congregation, prayed and finally concluded (with them) that it was the Lord's will for me to serve as their pastor. I had done this, however, without having ever seen their church's statement of faith.

It may be that some reading this aren't even aware that churches have such documents. But, historically, the first thing a congregationally-governed church would do is to set out its understanding of the message that they were together proclaiming. Sometimes this would simply be by simple statements at the beginning of their church covenant (the document that described how they would live); but in Baptist churches, it would usually include a separate statement of faith. In fact, this statement of faith came to have a literal priority over the church covenant, just as in the individual Christian's life, what we believe determines how we live. Our agenda (things we will do) is determined by our credenda (things we believe).

So, I had accepted the call to be the pastor of this church without knowing what the church officially believed. This caused me some pauses in my conscience, but realizing that I had asked for their statement of faith, and was told that there was none, I knew that at least it was no longer a living document. Therefore the

congregation would have little loyalty toward any old statement of faith we might find in their records. Furthermore, I had a good idea any church constituting in 1878 would have certainly begun with a statement of faith. I now wanted to find those original minutes, and see if they contained a statement of faith.

It was with great anticipation that probably around August of 1994 our church's retired secretary told me that she knew where the original minutes were. I asked her if she could get them. She promptly did, and in just a little while, had brought them to me. So, we're back to where this article began.

There I was, sitting at the desk, the large, old book awaiting my inspection. I paused. I thought of the advantages of ignorance, in case the confession was bad. But some combination of integrity and curiosity drove me to press ahead. I opened the book and began to read the hand-writing. And what I found both pleased and disappointed me.

Let me be honest. As a hearty believer in the doctrines of grace, I had hoped that the Philadelphia Confession would be there (the 18th century American version of the Second London Confession of 1689, the Baptist version of the Westminster Confession). I knew my history well enough to know that by the second half of the 19th century, this confession had fallen into disfavor and disuse among most Baptists, but I had lingering hopes for an exception.

I was pleased to find that the first act the congregation took at its constituting meeting in February of 1878 was to adopt a statement of faith. This to me seemed good and right and honest and straightforward. I appreciated the self-consciousness of setting forth publicly what the church believed. I thought such a document would help make the gospel central to the church. It would give a center and a circumference theologically to the congregation. So the fact that they had done this pleased me (and relieved me!).

I was disappointed by the fact that the confession was evidently too short to be the Philadelphia Confession or 1689. There were only 18 articles, and these were fairly brief. Reading over it for a few minutes, I realized that what this church had done was what most Baptist churches in America were doing at the time. They had simply adopted the New Hampshire Confession of Faith as their own local church's statement of faith. I immediately realized that here I was, a Calvinistic pastor, pastoring a less than fully Calvinistic church.

I read the statement first carefully making sure that at least I could affirm it (even if there is more I would like the document to say). I was relieved when I realized that I could. That meant that at least there would be no question of integrity. I would not be leading the congregation astray, at least not in the eyes of the human founders of the work.

Over the next few weeks and months, I came to appreciate our statement of faith even more; but I also used the 1689 for various purposes. I ordered copies of the 1689, and I used it, with both young Christians to disciple, and with older Christians to teach. I even remember sitting on my church's front steps talking with a non-Christian about the gospel, using the 1689's statements on justification to explain the gospel. It was and continues to remain a gloriously useful part of the ministry. The Westminster Divines are my teachers. And their Baptist revisers only improved the document. I continue to stand in their debt as a pastor, teacher and evangelist.

“The True Centre of Christian Union”

But I came to appreciate the New Hampshire Confession more and more as I began to do membership interviews for those who wanted to join the church. By early 1996 we were asking all those who were members to sign the church's statement of faith. Both for existing members, and for those new friends who were coming to Christ, the New Hampshire Confession's brevity, the brevity that I had first looked down on, I began to admire. Here were 18 straightforward articles. They were clothed in 19th century language, but that language was often stronger and more reflective of Scripture than some more modern 20th century statement. And it was closer to their language than the 17th century language of the 1689 Confession. The concision of the articles focused the conversations and questions of the new Christians and would-be members. Instead of getting lost in the finer points of theology—points that we did not have to agree upon in order to be a local church together—we could deal with the main points of doctrine.

True, there was no necessity to affirm definite atonement in the document, but the New Hampshire drafters had cleverly muted that disagreement by using the first person plural approach, making statements about “we” and “us.” This is how we sing in our hymns. We assume that the Christian gathering is for believers to sing God's praises. We know the unregenerate will be singing, too. There will be hypocrites, and the self-deceived, and non-Christian visitors. But still it is appropriate that we sing about “our great God” and “our salvation,” because it is the time and place set aside for public Christian praise of God.

So this is the statement made about Christ's work on the cross:

IV. Of The Way Of Salvation

We believe that the salvation of sinners is wholly of grace; through the mediatorial offices of the Son of God; who by the appointment of the Father, freely took upon him our nature, yet without sin; honored the divine law by his personal obedience, and by his death made a full atonement for our sins; that having risen from the dead he is now enthroned in heaven; and uniting in his wonderful person the tenderest sympathies with divine perfections, he is every way qualified to be a suitable, a compassionate, and an all-sufficient Saviour.

There was nothing in this I disagreed with. Christ did make a full atonement for our sins. Now I knew that some would be affirming this, thinking Christ also made a full atonement for the sins of the non-elect, but they also believed this. I have never thought that affirming definite atonement is necessary for salvation. Though I think it is biblical, I think I understand how many friends on this very point may believe in substitution as fully as I do, affirm that Christ's death is the only way to salvation, and yet think that in some way there is a secondary, non-salvific effectiveness latent in Christ's death, even worked by it, that is for all people. I am not persuaded that this opinion is correct. I will not have that opinion preached from our pulpit. We will not have an elder who wants to make a point of this. But I have come to think that our congregation is both richer

and more useful by not requiring agreement on this point at the time of entering our congregation. And the New Hampshire Confession gives us the freedom to have a wider evangelical membership, who then are led and taught by those who, like myself, have a more clearly and consistently biblical understanding of the atonement.

Christ's prayer for the unity of the church in John 17, Paul's pleas for it in Ephesians, the careful work of the apostles in Acts 2, all have led me to value the unity of Christians in a local congregation more highly than I may have in the early days of my Christian life. Surely, as the New Hampshire Confession says, Scripture "is, and shall remain to the end of the world, the true centre of Christian union", but it is up to us in our statements of faith to define this in ways that are useful for this end. We must balance the need for completeness of statement with comprehensiveness of inclusion.

My experience here has been that people join our congregation sometimes because they recognize that the preaching is clearly reformed. Other times, probably more often, they join simply because they've been converted here, or they've come from elsewhere, unaware of these debates, and they find the preaching to be biblical. Over time, this latter group comes to trust the leadership of this church. They get to know both our lives and our doctrine. And they come to affirm the sovereignty of God, the depravity of humanity, the sufficiency of grace—all of which is affirmed in the New Hampshire Confession. An Arminian could not honestly sign it. But they also become used to the effectual language about Christ's atonement. The authors we read, the studies we have, the sermons they hear—all affirm and define more fully our faith than any confession, regardless how full, ever could. Our elders will be more mature than the average member. They will have a better understanding of theology. And as our elders nominate new elders, we will, I pray, continue to be faithful in requiring of them an understanding of and a rejoicing in the doctrines of grace. And that brings up one last point to be made in this discussion.

Polity Matters

Polity effects what statement of faith is used. The Westminster Confession was written to be used by a national, established church, with a final centralized authority and no real personal statement of doctrine (other than those made by participation in baptism and the Lord's Supper). When it was baptistified in Restoration England, their purpose was at least as much to show that Baptists were not like the Continental Anabaptists—they were just like the reformed Episcopalians who had written it, the Presbyterians and Congregationalists—as it was to be used as a local congregation's statement of faith. The more congregational a church is in its polity, the more it needs to have a simpler, statement of faith.

When our friends join a Presbyterian church, they confess that their hope is in Christ alone for their salvation, and that they will submit to the authority of the church (meaning the teaching and discipline of the elders). Only the elders in a Presbyterian church need to affirm their statement of faith, because only they are the ones who will normally vote on and decide matters.

But when someone joins a congregationally driven church, like Baptists, the bar must be a little higher *for the general membership*, because that statement comprises all that we think we need and should agree on in our setting to be a functioning congregation. And that individual, once voted into membership, will have a vote in the final adjudicatory body of the congregation—the congregation as it meets for church business. That means we want to have enough in the document to be essential for us to be a biblically-faithful church, and yet not so much that we needlessly divide, or cause young Christians to stumble.

Pastors and church leaders need wisdom and prudence to know where this balance is. Many men I know, love, respect and learn from would say that the 1689 Confession is the best to do this. I once thought so. Now, having pastored a congregation for a little more than 10 years, and, by God’s grace, having seen evangelicals move to become members and become more clearly biblical in their understanding in the context of the congregation’s life and preaching, I think the New Hampshire Confession actually serves us better.

“But are you a Calvinist?”

I don’t shrink from the label “Calvinist.” In fact, in personal conversation I’ve often introduced myself as “a slobbering five-point Calvinist”! But in my public teaching and my writing, I try to use “biblical” as an adjective. And I do so not to say less than “Reformed” to my Arminian friend, but to say more. I do so to get in what they perceive to be their territory. If I say that our position is “Reformed,” Arminian or Wesleyan friends can simply dismiss me, thinking that I’m on the other side in an ancient battle, and am about to do no more than rehearse old disagreements. But if I call freshly on that which claims the allegiance of all evangelical parties—the Bible—and I work from there, I require their attention.

Surely God will be more glorified in this world as more people come to acknowledge the sovereignty and sufficiency of His grace. This is what we all desire. And I think that at this time in our setting, the New Hampshire Confession can better help men committed to the doctrines of grace and expositional preaching to lead our churches to grasp more fully the glories of God’s grace, and at the same time, allow people with questions to be a part of our congregations on the way there. Just as young pastors learn that by asking for too much too soon, they can lose a whole congregation, whereas patience can lead the whole congregation into a fuller appreciation of God’s truth, so with individual Christians, they can so often be led to understand God’s grace more fully if we don’t wrongly screen them out by asking too much, too soon.

Norton and Lloyd-Jones

In the 500th issue of the *Banner of Truth* magazine, Iain Murray, its founding editor, makes the observation of two different ways leaders in England were approaching the propagation of the reformed faith in the 1950’s. One was typified by Mr. Norton, a friend and co-laborer of Murray’s in starting *Banner of Truth*. He deliberately used “Calvinist” and “Arminian” a lot, even wanting to offend, in order to be clear, and to avoid the danger of compromising the truth. Another approach Murray says, was to stand clearly for the truth, but to do so

often without the 17th-century labels, to center on the biblical truths themselves. Murray observes that this was the way of Dr. Lloyd-Jones: “Dr. Lloyd-Jones preferred to teach the meaning of the words rather than to use the labels,” (*Banner of Truth*, #500 [May 2005] p. 10).

Honorable men are on both sides of this question. Their doctrine and goals are the same. There are risks on both sides. We must choose. I perceive the issues in the discussion of which statement of faith to use to be similar. And I'm with Dr. Lloyd-Jones on this one. ☺

Interview on the Second London Confession of 1689

Tom Ascol

The following questions were asked of Tom Ascol by Tom Nettles for this issue of the *Founders Journal*. Tom Ascol has served as pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, Florida since 1986.

Start by telling us how long your church has used the 1689 Confession.

Since 1989 Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, Florida has been guided by a commitment to the 1689 (Second London) Confession of Faith. We adopted that confession as detailed expression of our doctrinal commitments as a church and for the purpose of guiding us in the selection of officers, teachers and other leaders in the church. We use the edition that is published by the elders of Grace Baptist Church in Carlisle, PA but also allow for the use of the Carey edition, entitled *A Faith to Confess*. This latter edition employs modern language and is more easily read by some.¹

How does using a confession of faith benefit a church body?

A church can receive great benefit from properly using a (or more than one) confession of faith. By adopting a confession of faith a clear statement is made that on certain matters of faith and practice the church is pre-committed. That is, the church declares, “We are not looking for truth in these areas, we believe that we have found the truth of God’s Word on these subjects and this is what our views are.” This kind of pre-commitment is very useful in times of doctrinal uncertainty or controversy. If some members come to convictions that are contrary to the church’s confession, then those members can be addressed on

the basis of what the church has previously stated to be its views. Further, those seeking to join the church have in the confession a clear declaration of what can be expected in the preaching and teaching ministry.

A good confession can help promote the unity of the church. Opinions are not all equally valid and where there exists in a church a common commitment to a list of doctrinal convictions, those views that deviate from or contradict that commitment can be readily recognized and addressed. No church can long survive if it must continually reevaluate each and every doctrine when at once it is questioned.

A good confession can also help a church grow spiritually. Such a confession represents the collective wisdom of trusted teachers. It can prove to be a great source of instruction for those who are committed to understanding and applying biblical truth. A confession serves as a reminder of what God has taught others whose lives and views we respect. It can be consulted as a guide in Bible study, or can actually provide an outline for a doctrinal study of the Word.

What are the doctrinal strengths of the Second London Confession [2LC]?

The doctrinal strengths of the 2LC are seen in the comprehensiveness of its thirty-two chapters. Matters related to the heart of salvation are addressed in detail in at least twelve of those chapters, covering everything from “God’s Covenant” (chapter 7) to the “Assurance of Grace and Salvation” (chapter 18).

In addition to these soteriological chapters, the confession also treats matters related to the life and health of a local church. Twelve chapters address the Bible’s teachings on the law, gospel, Christian liberty, worship, the Sabbath, oaths, civil government, marriage, the church, communion of the saints and the ordinances (chapters 19–30).

In addition, chapters on authority (1), the nature and sovereignty of God (2–5), sin (5) and last things (31, 32) are included. All of these subjects are important to the spiritual vitality of individual believers and churches. As a believer grows in the grace and knowledge of the Lord, these are matters that he will discover he must develop opinions and perhaps even convictions on. It is very helpful for a local church to state plainly its position on these matters. Members can expect the teaching and preaching ministries of the church to be within these confessional boundaries. The confession can also be used as an excellent tool for the systematic study of biblical doctrines. The insights of those who have gone before us and whose testimonies have proven faithful are invaluable aids in study and growth.

Do you think that the length of the articles is helpful or confusing?

For the most part, I find the detail of the confession very helpful. False teaching does not typically engage in a frontal assault of accepted teachings. The current controversies surrounding justification demonstrate this. The “New Perspective(s) on Paul” could not get a foothold in a church or institution that took seriously the 2LC. Further, those arguments that purport to stand against much of what the New Perspective teaches and yet which are willing to give up the imputation of Christ’s righteousness would be exposed as deficient if the

2LC's explanation of justification obtained. Chapter 11, paragraph 1 states,

Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth, not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing Christ's active obedience unto the whole law, and passive obedience in his death for their whole and sole righteousness by faith, which faith they have not of themselves; it is the gift of God.

The confession is far from perfect, however, and it is not above criticism. It is, after all, a declaration of what the Scriptures teach and not itself inerrant or infallible. Chapter 20 is a case in point. Though four paragraphs are given to affirm the freeness of gospel preaching to all people, the language is stilted and not as plain as it could and should be. The effort to address this issue (missing in the Westminster Confession) is very commendable. The expression of that which is affirmed should be clearer.

How does it serve in the process of a person becoming a church member?

We require each applicant for church membership to acknowledge that the 2LC is our church's most comprehensive summary of what we believe and teach. They are not required to agree with it at every point but they do agree not to teach against what it affirms. The New Hampshire Confession is a less detailed offspring of the 2LC and we do expect each member to agree with its eighteen brief articles.

Do pastors/elders relate differently to the 2LC than those members that are not so called?

The New Testament holds pastors/elders to a higher standard of doctrinal understanding and commitment than is true of other church members. No believer is free to disregard any truth of God's Word but the Scripture recognizes that not everyone will have the same understanding at the same time about all that God has revealed (Philippians 3:15; 2 Corinthians 8; Romans 14). A healthy church will be comprised of believers at various stages of growth and maturity. Church officers, however, are to be among the most mature, which means, in part, that they are to be among the most doctrinally clear-headed (Acts 20:28-31; 1 Timothy 4:16; Titus 1:9-11; 2:1-8).

Both elders and deacons in our church are called on to stand before the church and declare (among other things) that they have "personally adopted and will cheerfully submit to and defend" the 2LC. This kind of commitment helps protect the church from those who might come among us and lead us away from our doctrinal commitments.

How does it serve in the educational process of the church?

Like most Baptist churches, we have a multifaceted educational ministry and teaching positions are often filled by members who are not elders. When selecting teachers, however, the elders use the 2LC as a tool to help evaluate a member's spiritual and doctrinal maturity. Every teacher is required to declare that he or she is in substantive agreement with the 2LC and they will not teach contrary to it. Teachers are encouraged to use the confession in their own study and preparation for their classes. We have also taught through the confession, or from selected parts, in various educational settings in the church. I spent a year using the confession to guide my preaching on doctrinal subjects on Sunday nights and currently I am using it for a doctrinal study on Wednesday nights.

Our confessional commitments help us evaluate curricula that we use. We do not hesitate to edit material to serve our purposes based on what we believe. And we will not use material that is contrary to our doctrinal commitments.

How does it serve in the discipline of the church?

As I have already mentioned, all officers and teachers are expected to minister in keeping with the 2LC. Our teachers agree to withdraw from teaching if their doctrinal commitments move outside the confession over the course of their tenure. Our teachers know that they can be removed by the elders if they change their convictions and do not voluntarily step down. This has happened only twice in the last sixteen years.

Our confessional commitments have kept some people from becoming covenanted members with us. Over the years several sincere believers have inquired about membership out of an appreciation for various aspects of the church's life and ministry. But their settled convictions in certain areas contradicted our own settled convictions. Unable to persuade them, we have encouraged them to unite with churches where their views will not be problematic.

We have also had a few occasions to remind particular members of their commitment not to teach contrary to the church's confession. In those cases it has been very helpful to have the 2LC in place as a statement of our beliefs. The confession served as a reminder that the church has not changed in its doctrinal commitments. One brother who did change his views and felt compelled to speak out about it was encouraged to reconsider based on the insights of the 2LC. When we failed to convince him, he was encouraged and helped to find another church where he could express his views conscientiously. It was a sad, but not acrimonious, separation.

How is it related to biblical exposition in the church?

I do not automatically check my sermons by the 2LC to make sure that I am staying within its doctrinal boundaries. I do not have to since I am in agreement with it. I do consult it when I run up against knotty theological issues in my expositional work. If I find myself coming to conclusions that are contrary to the confession, I pause and give serious reconsideration to the text. Often the

problem has been one of language or emphasis. Never have I found myself in contradiction to the clear doctrinal commitments of the confession.

Another idea you would like to cover

In a day of doctrinal minimalism, the 2LC can seem overwhelming and unnecessary in its comprehensiveness. Where this judgment is held and joined with a subtle elitism that lacks full appreciation for the priesthood of all believers, the confession can be easily dismissed as inappropriate for local church use. I completely disagree with that assessment. So did the churches that framed and adopted it in 1677. So did the churches in the Philadelphia Association in 1742. So did the churches of the Charleston Association in 1767. So did the two hundred-ninety-three delegates who met in Augusta, Georgia in 1845 to form the Southern Baptist Convention. Every one of them came from churches or associations that held to this confession. Charles Haddon Spurgeon had great appreciation for this confession. When he reprinted it for his own congregation's use, he included this preface:

This little volume is not issued as an authoritative rule, or code of faith, whereby you are to be fettered, but as an assistance to you in controversy, a confirmation in faith, and a means of edification in righteousness. Here the younger members of our church will have a body of divinity in small compass, and by means of Scriptural proofs, will be ready to give an account for the hope that is in them. Be not ashamed of your faith; remember it is the ancient gospel of martyrs, confessors, reformers and saints. Above all, it is "the truth of God", against which the gates of Hell cannot prevail. Let your lives adorn your faith, let your example adorn your creed. Above all live in Christ Jesus, and walk in Him, giving credence to no teaching but that which is manifestly approved of Him, and owned by the Holy Spirit. Cleave fast to the Word of God which is here mapped out for you.

The 1689 Confession is indeed a safe guide into the teachings of God's Word. If it were better known, appreciated and used in our day, the Baptist cause would be greatly strengthened. ☛

Notes:

¹One very unfortunate and undoubtedly inadvertent change that the modern version makes is in chapter 18, paragraph 3, where the little word "so" is omitted. The original reads, "This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be a partaker of it." *A Faith to Confess* reads, "The infallible assurance of salvation is not an essential part of salvation, for a true believer may wait for a long time, and struggle with many difficulties, before he attains to it." Those familiar with the historical debate over assurance will recognize that the word "so" is arguably the most important word in the sentence.

How (and Why) Your Church Should Hold to the 1689 Confession

Sam Waldron

Earlier this year 9Marks Ministry published an article by Shawn Wright, professor of history at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, in which he argued that the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith should not be used as a local church's statement of faith. That article is available online at www.9marks.org. This article by Sam Waldron is a response in defense of the use of the 1689 Confession by local churches.

Introduction

Before I come to the momentous issues that this little essay addresses, there are three things I want to make clear.

A Word about Shawn Wright

I want, first, to say a word about my friend, Shawn Wright. I know and respect Shawn through our mutual associations with Southern Seminary in Louisville. I have cited his work with respect on other occasions. I take no joy in disagreeing with him here. It is only my sense that momentous issues have been raised by his article in the *9 Marks Newsletter* that impels me to make this critical assessment of his views.

Hence, I have endeavored not to use his name against him. I will not entitle this article homonymically, "Is Wright Right?" Or even more alliteratively, "Is Wright Wrong?" Or a more assertive alliteration, "Wright Is Wrong!"

A Word about 9 Marks

Let me also make clear my general esteem for the ministry of 9 Marks. I believe that 9 Marks and the Center for Church Reform have been the agent of great good. Nothing I say here is intended to depreciate its ministry. In fact, my fellow elders and I at Heritage Baptist Church of Owensboro, Kentucky wish to recommend to others this ministry. This is one of the reasons why we were so dismayed to find the views expressed by Wright's article apparently recommended by 9 Marks. I am thankful for the opportunity they provided to respond to those views in a later edition of that newsletter.

A Word about Why I Am Writing

I really have two reasons for writing. First of all, I am deeply desirous to commend the use of the 1689 Baptist Confession as a local church confession.

I fear that Wright's views would have all sorts of negative consequences for the cause of the reformation of Baptist churches in our day.

I am not in expressing such desires and in opposing Wright's views assuming that the 1689 Baptist Confession is a perfect confession. As the following argument will show, this is not at all my view. I believe that at the right time, and when it can be done with broad unity among Baptists committed to the cause of reformation, the Confession is in need of some slight revision and considerable expansion. I do have doubts as to whether now is the time for such changes, but that is another issue.

My second reason for writing is that Wright has raised an important and practical question in his article. This question is reflected in the title of this response. That question is, "How is the 1689 Baptist Confession to be subscribed by the members of the church?" Must a local church that holds the 1689 Baptist Confession (or, for that matter, any particular confession) require its members to hold or believe every jot and tittle in that confession? This, I think, is a vastly important issue and one about which there is (as Wright's article illustrates) considerable misunderstanding in our day.

Specific Comments

I have chosen to organize my response to Wright under the two headings of specific comments and general concerns. Wright develops his arguments by means of brief statements about the historical context of the 1689, the purpose of local churches' statements of faith, and the doctrinal specificity of the 1689, and then a brief conclusion and annotated bibliography. I will make specific comments about each of these matters before coming to my general concerns.

The Historical Context of the 1689

Wright is at pains to inform us that the 1689 is historically conditioned by the religious events taking place in mid-seventeenth century England. His historical account is accurate. He assures us that all historical documents have a particular, historical context. He affirms that the 1689 is neither heretical nor useless as a result. Nevertheless, Wright is seeking through his emphasis on its historical context to support the view that the 1689 should not be "used as a local church statement of faith." This logic, however, cannot be consistently carried out. All statements of faith are historically conditioned. Are they all, therefore, defective as statements of faith for local churches?

Wright's comments here leave the impression that the historical origins of the 1689 are somehow "accidental" to the identity of Particular or Reformed Baptists. He implies that the historical circumstances are somehow separable from the identity of Particular and Reformed Baptists. Let us be clear that it is not so. The Particular Baptists were not Baptist who by some historical accident happened to be Reformed. Particular Baptists, as I think Wright knows, emerged from the Puritan movement by means of Puritan Congregationalism.

They were Puritans who by the gradual evolution of Puritan thought in England became Baptists. These Baptists were determined in the First and Second London Baptist Confessions to distance themselves from both Anabaptists and

General Baptists. Their origins were distinct. It is completely consistent with this and reflective of their very identity that they should have a Puritan confession. The 1689 Baptist Confession is not an historical accident. Rather, it reflects the distinctive nature of Particular or Reformed Baptists.¹

Under this point, Wright notes the assertion of the 1689 at 26:4 that the Pope of Rome is the Antichrist. Although this statement reflects the view of prophecy held in common by Protestants of the time, I agree with Wright that this statement ought not to have been made or be part of our confession today.² This is one of those places where, in my opinion, a slight revision of the 1689 Confession is necessary. In my experience (having become a Reformed Baptist pastor in 1977 and having shepherded two Reformed Baptist churches during that time) Reformed Baptist churches today, when they express their allegiance to the Confession in their constitutions, commonly make an exception of this statement.³

The Purpose of Local Churches' Statements of Faith

Wright remarks next that a local church's statement of faith serves two functions. First, it "must provide an outline of the church's theology that will determine the contours of the church's teaching and preaching ministries. In this way, it can serve as a teaching tool for the church members." Second, it "protects the congregation from false teachers and heresy." Wright maintains that the 1689 works well in the second function, but is too specific with regard to the first.

There is a *non sequitur* in Wright's reasoning as he moves from these statements about the functions of statements of faith into his next point about doctrinal specificity. Having said that the 1689 fails in the first function noted above—the function of determining the contours of the church's teaching ministries and as a teaching tool—he proceeds to argue on this basis that the 1689 is too specific in what it requires for church membership. Has not Wright changed the subject here? Which is it? Is the 1689 as a teaching tool for leading church members to "stand perfect and complete in all the will of God" (Colossians 4:12) or too doctrinally specific as a condition of church membership? Perhaps Wright does not distinguish these two things. They seem, however, emphatically different to me and this difference—as I will make clear below—is foundational to my understanding of confessionalism.

The Doctrinal Specificity of the 1689

Wright finds the 1689 Confession too doctrinally specific and provides three illustrations of this excessive tightness. He finds its assertion of "a literal six-day creation," "definite atonement" and "a Sabbatarian view of the Lord's Day" too strict.⁴ He remarks that such doctrinal tightness "stops believers from uniting with each other as members in a local church," limits "membership" and are "required belief(s) for church membership."

If he thinks that a church's holding the 1689 Baptist Confession requires such limitations on membership, Wright is either misinformed or has jumped to an unnecessary conclusion. My own experience among Reformed Baptist churches holding the 1689 contradicts Wright's assumptions about the practice

of churches holding it. I do not favor and have not practiced as a pastor of two different Reformed Baptist churches limiting church membership to those who hold or believe every specific assertion of the Confession. In fact, I have frequently cited in personal conversation both the Christian Sabbath and Definite Atonement as issues where such agreement ought not to be required for church membership.

Further proof that Wright is misinformed has recently been given by the circular letter prepared for the 2005 Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America General Assembly by Dr. Jim Renihan entitled, “The Doctrinal and Practical Standards for Local Church Membership according to the Bible and the Second London Confession of Faith.” Among many other remarks relevant to the issue at hand, Renihan says:

We must notice what the Confession does not say. It does not say that every believer must have a full-blown understanding of Christian theology, even of its own theology, in order to become part of a church. In fact, the disqualifying condition is not a lack of understanding, but rather the actual commitment to heretical views. So long as the person does not hold such positions, but articulates faith in Christ and lives as an obedient disciple, he or she should be part of the church.⁵

One pastor at the discussion has written this comment about the General Assembly’s discussion of this letter: “Open discussion of the matter revealed a mutual determination among the brethren to continue to implement the SLC with a gracious, redemptive flexibility... For most of our churches, full (not absolute) subscription is required only of the elders.”

Wright and those of his viewpoint may think such flexibility inconsistent. They are, of course, allowed their opinion. They should not, however, misrepresent our practice to themselves or others. Furthermore, I will argue below that such flexibility is perfectly consistent with a church’s holding one of the great Reformed confessions.

Conclusion and Bibliography

Several comments on Wright’s conclusion and bibliography are necessary. First, I want to note Wright’s commendation of the 1689 as “a tremendous statement of historic Reformed (and, I think, biblical) doctrine.” This is good, if a trifle inconsistent. The 1689 Baptist Confession has always functioned and still functions mainly as a local church confession. What else could it be in the midst of a Baptist ecclesiology? If it is no longer to function as such, it is doubtful that few will ever come (like Wright) to “recommend it highly as a guide for biblical doctrine.” Wright’s rejection of it as a local church confession really amounts to a proposal to consign it to the dusty archives of Baptist libraries!

Second, it is interesting to note that Wright thinks Belcher and Mattia’s, *A Discussion of the Seventeenth Century Particular Baptist Confessions of Faith* a helpful discussion. Actually, Wright’s argument about the historical conditioning of the 1689 is similar to those Belcher and Mattia are opposing in their fine little book.⁶

Third, let me thank Wright for his very kind words about my own *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*. It should be evident by now, however, that I wrote that book out of the conviction that it could serve as a wonderful “teaching tool for church members” and as such a fine (even the best available) local church confession.

General Concerns

Why Church Membership Does Not Require Full Subscription

Despite my protest that full subscription is not commonly required of church members, Wright may still think that not requiring this is inconsistent. How can the practice of not requiring full subscription of all church members be justified, and why is it important?

The first and most fundamental thing to understand here is that the formally adopted confessions, creeds, or statements of faith of a local church do not possess of themselves divine authority.⁷

They are clearly a species or kind of human authority. Their very designations reveal this. They are confessions—what we confess. They are creeds—from the Latin *credo*—what the church believes. They are not in themselves divine revelation. Tom Nettles remarks:

That we acknowledge a confession as strictly a humanly composed document is an important step in a quest for unity. All conservative Christian denominations believe that their theologies and ecclesiologies are true reflections of biblical teaching. Hardly any sincere Christian would say, “You are biblical and obviously I am not, but I will stay what I am.” Though they disagree, each believes his position is biblical. The human document meets the essential need of revealing the different understanding of the Bible. When these understandings differ significantly in vital areas, unity of purpose and mission become difficult if not impossible.⁸

One implication of the fact that confessions possess only human authority (and it is an implication not frequently enough appreciated) is that no confession (or church) ought to demand absolute agreement, blind faith, or implicit obedience. Only divine authority may require such responses. Still, this does not mean that confessions have no authority. They have a human kind of authority. The key word used in the Bible for how we should relate to human authority is *hupotassein*. This verb has for its essential idea subjection or subordination. While subordination may involve agreement and usually requires obedience, these are distinct concepts. Of course, we must also be subject to divine authority, but our duty to divine authority goes far beyond mere subjection. Human authority, however, is commonly and essentially described by way of such subjection. Children are to be subject to parents (Luke 2:51; Hebrews 12:9), slaves to masters (Titus 2:9; 1 Peter 2:18), women to men in church (1 Corinthians 14:34), wives to husbands (Ephesians 5:24; Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1, 5), subjects to their civil authorities (Romans 13:1, 5; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13), the younger to the elder (1 Peter 5:5), prophets to the whole prophetic band (1 Corinthians 14:32), Christians

to Christian ministers (1 Corinthians 16:16). Even demons are subject to the seventy, and this clearly does not mean that they agree with them (Luke 10:17).

It is not merely generic human authority that confronts us in the church's confession. In the local church and in its confessions we have to do with a special kind of human authority. Christians unlike children and slaves and subjects may choose the local church they will join. Though every Christian must seek to join a local church, he is not obligated to join any particular local church. Here he is left to his own conscience bound by the Word of God. Clearly, where subordination to a human authority is voluntary in its origin (whether of a prospective wife to a prospective husband or of a prospective church member to a prospective church and its confession) as much agreement as possible should be sought. This will make the relationship sweeter and better for all concerned. Yet, just as a bride ought not to think that she must agree with her prospective husband about everything in order to submit to him, so also a prospective church member ought not to think that absolute agreement with his church, its elders, or its confession is necessary in order to subordinate himself to them. To think that such agreement is required in order to such submission would practically destroy both marriage and the local church. None of us—not even any of us Christians—has such perfect agreement with other human beings.

All this means several very practical things with regard to the church member's relationship to the church and its confession. Of course, the elders on behalf of the church must inquire if a prospective church member has any actual disagreements with the confession. The elders must determine that any such disagreements are not foundational errors, are consistent with a credible profession of faith, and consistent with church membership on other grounds. Yet, from the viewpoint of the prospective member only the agreement sufficient to make subordination possible is necessary. This requires all prospective members to read carefully the church's confession. The church member need not, however, fully understand the confession of the church or fully agree with it. If he agrees with it sufficiently that he can submit to it sweetly, live with it peaceably, and respond to its exposition teachably, this is all that it is required. Of course, if someone cannot be sweet, peaceable, and teachable under the teaching of any given confession, he should not join a church that holds it.

It is clear from all this that a vital distinction must be maintained between the members and the elders of the church. Members need only submit to the confession. Elders are obliged to teach it (1 Timothy 3:2; 2 Timothy 2:24; Titus 1:9). This clearly implies that elders sustain a different kind of relation to the church's confession. Specifically, it implies a much greater degree of agreement than that required of church members. From this perspective, Wright's slipping (in the *non sequitur* I pointed out above) from the use of the confession as a teaching tool to the requirement of full subscription of church members obscures a vital distinction with regard to confessionalism.

Failure to make this vital distinction has serious consequences. In the first place, Wright's position seems to require that the church confess only as much its newest, baptized member understands and believes. Is the church's confession to be limited to what its newest baptized member believes? I think not. The church is required to believe and confess much more than this. The great Reformation confessions act on this principle and are repositories and treasuries of what the

church had come to believe over the previous 1600 years. The confession of the church must not be held hostage to the beliefs of its youngest members. The youngest members must be nurtured redemptively and lovingly up into the fullness of its faith. If the newest and youngest members already believe and understand a church's statement of faith, what becomes of the function of the confession as a teaching tool?

In the second place, it may be suggested that Wright's neglect of this vital distinction between members and ministers results in making it divisive to insist on the importance of any doctrine beyond that contained in a church's simple statement of faith. If the church's unity is expressed in its statement of faith, and its statement of faith is limited to what its youngest members believe, then does it not become divisive to insist on the importance of definite atonement or anything else that the most immature member does not understand? Such teaching of the deeper things of God, then, must never be made central to the life of the church because it would threaten the unity of the church which is based on a simpler faith. On this view it would become divisive for a church to bear public, formal, and explicit witness even to the doctrines of grace. I do not think Wright or those who share his view want this consequence, but I think they need to explain why their view does not lead to it.

Why Differences Should Not Be Veiled by Complaints about Specificity

Wright's desire for less specificity in confessions veils what I believe to be important doctrinal differences between him and the 1689 Confession. Let me hasten to say that he does not seem to be deliberately hiding such differences. Let me also hasten to say that he may not think these differences important. But I may think them important! I should be allowed to decide for myself if they are—without being accused of exclusivity, rigidity and tightness. Isn't this the very kind of "moderate" argument that Wright rejects? Isn't he saying, "Can't we all just get along? Why do we need so much doctrinal specificity?" Now, of course, we must all draw the line somewhere. I have even said that in this little essay. I am not prepared to assume that no great doctrinal differences are revealed by variant views on six-day creationism, definite atonement, or the Christian Sabbath. Charges of too much doctrinal specificity in the 1689 Confession tend to derail important theological and practical discussions that need to take place today among Baptists of Calvinistic persuasion.

Why Churches Ought to Hold the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith

This meaty and profoundly reverent confession of faith holds several benefits for subscribing churches. Churches should hold the 1689 because:

- It is a repository of the great doctrines of Christian orthodoxy regarding the Scriptures, the Trinity, and the Person of Christ.
- Its distinctives are biblical. Its Reformed approach to God, His decree, the work of Christ, the application of salvation, the law of God, and Christian worship is biblical. Its Baptist approach to the covenants, the ordinances, and the local church are all deeply and substantially biblical.

- It identifies them with their historical origins. There are great and important historical differences between Anabaptists, General Baptists, and Particular Baptists.
- It provides both an adequate standard of church membership and a wonderful goal for instruction. The 1689 provides a rich treasure of truth to set before new members as a goal for their Christian maturation.

Let me close with an illustration. Wright invites you to go with him to the church picnic and share with him his little basket of truth. The food in it is good and nutritious, but limited in its variety, flavor, and quantity. You eat of every dish, but find that it leaves you with cravings. I also invite you to go with me to the church picnic. I have in the back of my SUV a large cooler full of wonderful ice-cold drinks and a gigantic picnic basket filled with luscious foods. You may think at first that though the spread looks inviting overall, it seems too rich and exotic for the appetite of one person. You will find, however, that each morsel serves as an appetizer for the next. And the more you linger over each dish the more delightful the whole seems to be. I will not even make you eat every one of my treats—even though I think them all delicious—but I am sure that eventually you will find all of them satisfying and salubrious. It seems to me the reader's choice is clear. ☺

Notes:

¹Erroll Hulse, *An Introduction to the Baptists* (Haywards Heath, Sussex, England: Carey Publications, 1973), 1720; James M. Renihan, *The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists* (PhD dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1997), 1–31.

²The meaning of the Confession's assertion must be understood in the context of the historicist interpretation of prophecy. It is “the line of popes” that is “the antichrist.” While I do not think that this is the reference of 2 Thessalonians 2 and 1 John 2, it remains true that (in spite of the positive Roman Catholic stand on moral and family issues today) Tridentine Catholicism is “anti-Christian.” It also remains possible that a future pope might be “the antichrist.”

³The constitution of both the Reformed Baptist churches of which I have been a pastor makes this exception: “We regard the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 (excepting the assertions regarding the salvation of the mentally incompetent [10:3] and the identity of the antichrist [26:4]) . . . as excellent, though not inspired, expressions of the teaching of the Word of God. Because we acknowledge the Word of God written to be the supreme authority in all matters of faith, morals, and order, we adopt these two historic documents as our doctrinal standards. We find them to be an assistance in controversy, a confirmation in faith, and a means of edification in righteousness.”

⁴Wright reveals his own anti-sabbatarian tendency by citing Colossians 2:16 in support of not making the Christian Sabbath a required belief. If Colossians 2:16 has any reference to “the Christian Sabbath,” Wright is not only correct that such a view should not be a requirement for church membership, but also shows that any sabbatic view of the Lord's Day is wrong and tends to the Colossian heresy. Of course, the problem is that no knowledgeable proponent of the Christian Sabbath thinks that Colossians 2:16 has any reference to Lord's Day observance.

Continued on page 26.

A Suggested Addition to the Second London Confession

Tom J. Nettles

The experience of Southern Baptists in the 20th century demonstrated both the aggravations and the consolations of confessional unions. Liberalism in general and evolution in particular gave rise to the *Baptist Faith and Message* in 1925. Just a couple of years earlier, American Baptist liberals had maneuvered their annual meeting to avoid the adoption of a confession using the strategy of affirming the New Testament as their only authority. Southern Baptists saw the fallacy, and deceitfulness, of that approach and retarded the slide into liberalism to a snail's pace by adopting the confession, though many sought greater explicitness on creation as opposed to evolution.

Subterranean shifts in theological education popped above ground with the Elliott controversy in the later 50's and early 60's. In 1963 the Convention adopted an amended and contextualized version of the *Baptist Faith and Message*. The effect of this was to create an impression of doctrinal reaffirmation to serve as a warning against radical theological departures while broadening the scope of doctrinal tolerance. The following decades revealed the essential failure of the BF&M committee to create a unifying document. Their equivocal language frustrated the theological convictions of most Southern Baptists. Those convictions were worked out in a series of controversies over textbooks, college teachers, Sunday School literature, the commentary series and other books by Broadman Press, and the theological direction of the seminaries.

These intervening decades of controversy culminated with the adoption of another *Baptist Faith and Message* in 2000. This edition closed some of the doctrinal loopholes created by the 1963 version and added more doctrinal specificity in critical areas of contemporary theological debate such as the nature of God and the nature and focus of Scripture. In addition, it provided clear positions on missiological and cultural/ethical issues.

Confessions, if the historic Baptist use of them gives a clue to their proper utility, must serve a two-fold purpose. They should express in unequivocal, and perhaps in increasingly clear terms, the great doctrines common to orthodox, protestant, evangelical Christians. Second they should provide opportunity, in some way, to interact with new challenges and give more pertinent attention to the legitimate Bible-centered progress of Christian thought.

Sometimes a separate statement of implications of the confession may serve the purpose of speaking theologically about current challenges. That will keep the confession from becoming cluttered with issues that could possibly pass with time and new developments. Articles of that nature may be removed or relegated to footnotes for historical purposes without destroying the integrity of the confession. Sometimes issues have such important theological substance that they warrant a theological statement. Theological discussions and denominational pragmatics (sometimes a good thing) have brought missions and evan-

gelism to confessional status. Article XI of the *Baptist Faith and Message*, entitled “Evangelism and Missions” states:

It is the duty and privilege of every follower of Christ and of every church of the Lord Jesus Christ to endeavor to make disciples of all nations. The new birth of man’s spirit by God’s Holy Spirit means that birth of love for others. Missionary effort on the part of all rests thus upon a spiritual necessity of the regenerate life, and is expressly commanded in the teachings of Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel to all nations. It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle, and by other methods in harmony with the gospel of Christ.

It lists around forty Scripture proofs from Genesis to Revelation as scriptural support for the article.

The 1677/1689 confession of the London Baptists, now universally useful among many Baptist churches, anticipated the missions movement in some ways. The historical dynamics, however, that pressed missions into the Baptist conscience developed through the subsequent century. Because the theological discussion preceding this missions movement dealt with issues inseparable from the doctrine of the fall and sin, the nature of the gospel, the covenant of redemption, and the person and work of Christ, the church’s stewardship of the gospel world-wide should be a part of its confessional commitment.

Some might include missions as a confessional statement by adding a new article entirely. Some might adopt the statement from the *Baptist Faith and Message* or some similar existing statement. Others might include it as a part of a separate statement on implications of the confession.

I suggest keeping the article (20) intact and adding some sections that expand other ideas of paramount importance. Because the Second London Confession is fully consistent with a missionary theology, our task is to implant within the appropriate article the missionary theology that naturally flows from the entire confession. I have tried to suggest a wording within article 20 that clearly states the mature missionary theology that emerged from the “modern question” conflict of the eighteenth century as expressed by Fuller, Carey, Pearce, Sutcliff, Robert Hall, Sr., John Ryland, Jr., and Abraham Booth. After my suggested textual additions, I have tried to refer to places in the confession that warrant the added text. Also I have added proof texts that support the textual additions. The confession not only must be internally consistent, but clearly conformed to the whole of divine revelation.

I transcribe the text of the chapter with additions. My suggested additions are in italics along with the suggested Scripture proofs. Locations within the larger confession that support the suggested additions are discussed beneath each respective paragraph.

1. The covenant of works being broken by sin, and made unprofitable unto life, God was pleased to give forth the promise of Christ, the seed of the woman,

as the means of calling the elect, and begetting in them faith and repentance; in this promise the gospel, as to the substance of it, was revealed, and [is] therein effectual for the conversion and salvation of sinners. [Genesis 3:15; Revelation 13:8] *This promised grace assumes the creation truth that mankind bears of the divine image and is thus made for the love and praise of God. God's purpose, therefore, of restoring an elect people to His favor through Christ and reinstating Himself as the sole source and object of their praise and worship does not exclude any of fallen humanity from the duty to pursue the ends of the Gospel [Ephesians 1:9-12; Philippians 1:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:8-11, 15-17.]*

[Compare Chapter 4, paragraph 2 entire but particularly “rendering them fit unto that life to God for which they were created.” Also, Compare chapter 7, paragraph 2 which states “Moreover, man having brought himself under the curse of the law by his fall, it pleased the Lord to make a covenant of grace, wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved; and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life, his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe.”]

2. This promise of Christ, and salvation by Him, is revealed only by the Word of God; neither do the works of creation or providence, with the light of nature, make discovery of Christ, or of grace by him, so much as in a general or obscure way; much less that men destitute of the revelation of Him by the promise or gospel, should be enabled thereby to attain saving faith or repentance. [Romans 1:16; 10:14-17; Proverbs 29:18; Isaiah 25:7; 60:2, 3] *God provides, therefore, by command and providence, that proclamation of the full counsel of God be made to all men as sinners. The law initially written on the heart, as well as the moral law revealed to Israel, fully complies with the grace of the Gospel. This reality most forcefully implies that Christ's Gospel be proclaimed to all fallen humanity. The decree of salvation for the elect of every tongue, tribe, nation, involves of necessity the proclamation of both the Gospel and the accompanying duties of repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus to all men everywhere. [Revelation 5:12-14; 7; Acts 17:24-31; 1 Timothy 1:12-16]*

[Compare chapter 2, paragraph 2 “to him is due from angels and men, whatsoever worship, or obedience, as creatures they owe unto the Creator, and whatever he is further pleased to require of them.” Also compare chapter 5, paragraph 6, “whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves, **under those means which God useth for the softening of others.**” Also compare chapter 19, paragraph 2, “The same law that was first written in the heart of man continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness after the fall, and was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, etc.” paragraph 5, “The moral law doth for ever bind all, as well justified persons as others ... neither doth Christ in the Gospel any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation.” And paragraph 7 “Neither are the aforementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the Gospel, but **do sweetly**

comply with it, the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely and cheerfully which the **will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done.**”]

3. The revelation of the Gospel unto sinners, made in divers times and by sundry parts, with the addition of promises and precepts for the obedience required therein, as to the nations and persons to whom it is granted, is merely of the sovereign will and good pleasure of God; not being annexed by virtue of any promise to the due improvement of men’s natural abilities, by virtue of common light received without it, which none ever did make, or can do so; and therefore in all ages, the preaching of the gospel has been granted unto persons and nations, as to the extension [extent] or limiting [streightning] of it, in great variety, according to the counsel of the will of God. *His secret will and good pleasure in this wise providence, however, is not the rule of our action; but rather his church must be governed by his commission of the gospel to all nations as the means of their calling. The apostolic work of careful dissemination, defense, and confirmation of the Gospel among all nations bore fruit only by virtue of the sovereign, inscrutable, and insuperable work of the Spirit embedding the preached word with vital power, and at the same time manifested the apostolic understanding of his command to make disciples. [Acts 13:48; Philippians 1:6; Colossians 1:3-6; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-7; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-15; 2 Timothy 2:8-10; James 1:17, 18; 1 Peter 1:22-25]*

[Elements of this original article give direct refutation to the Arminian contention that fallen humanity by virtue of universal prevenient grace may respond positively to natural revelation and thus gain God’s favor for a further hearing of the gospel or even perhaps having their natural religion account to them as virtual faith in Christ, though they never have heard the gospel. {See chapter 10, paragraph 4 on this account also.} Thomas Grantham, a general Baptist, specifically taught this and taught that apart from such prevenient grace, sinners could not be held responsible for their refusal to comply with the implications of natural revelation or of the preached gospel. Compare chapter 3, paragraph 1 – “nor yet is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away.” Paragraph 6. ‘foreordained all the means thereunto.’ Chapter 5, paragraph 2 “yet by the same providence he ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either, necessarily, freely, or contingently.” Chapter 10, paragraph 1 – “by his word and Spirit ... enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God;” paragraph 4 “Much less can men that receive not the Christian religion be saved.” Also chapter 14, paragraph 1, “The grace of faith . . . is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word.”]

4. *We, therefore, affirm and have joyful confidence in these indivisible truths: the gospel is the only outward means of revealing Christ and saving grace, and is, as such abundantly sufficient thereunto; yet that men who are dead in*

trespasses may be born again, quickened or regenerated, [omit semi-colon and insert comma] there is moreover necessary, beyond the mere persuasive power of bare truth, an effectual insuperable work of the Holy Spirit upon the whole soul, for the producing in them a new spiritual life; without which no other means will effect their conversion unto God. [Psalm 110:3; 1 Corinthians 2:14; Ephesians 1:19, 20; John 6:44; 2 Corinthians 4, 4, 6] *The substance of all missionary and evangelistic labors, therefore, must be the proclamation of the Gospel. Apart from this message we may not expect God's Spirit to honor our efforts with the reclaiming of the lost. In the context of such labors one may always hope that the Spirit will lead the lost to Christ.*

[Compare also chapter X on effectual calling paragraph 1: “inlightening [sic] their minds, spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God;” also paragraph 4; “although they may be called by the Ministry of the word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet not being effectually drawn by the Father, they neither will nor can truly come to Christ.” Also see chapter XIV.1, “Of Saving Faith;” “The Grace of Faith, whereby the Elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts; and is ordinarily wrought by the Ministry of the Word.” And XIV.2 “By this faith a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself; and also apprehendeth an excellency therein, above all other writings; and all things in the world ... and so is enabled to cast his Soul upon the truth thus believed.”]

An addition such as this would be consistent with the full light of Scripture truth, the historical flow of Baptist history, and the internal implications of the Confession itself. For at least a two-fold purpose such an addition holds promise for edification and conscientious discipleship: One, we should articulate a clear theological motivation for personal and world-wide evangelization, avoiding the error of the hyper-Calvinist; Two, we must help correct the tendency to abort evangelism from its theological womb but must insist that it be nurtured and matured and kept alive by its fructifying connection with the whole of doctrinal truth. ☪

Continued from page 21

⁵James M. Renihan, “The Doctrinal and Practical Standards for Local Church Membership according to the Bible and the Second London Confession of Faith,” *Circular Letter* prepared for the 2005 ARBCA General Assembly.

⁶Richard P. Belcher and Anthony Mattia, *A Discussion of the Seventeenth Century Particular Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Southbridge, MA: Crowne Publications, 1990), i–vi.

⁷Of course, I acknowledge that they are intended to articulate the teachings of divine revelation. In this restricted sense they possess a derivative divine authority, but they do not possess this authority of themselves.

⁸Tom Nettles, “The Role of Confessions in Baptist Faith,” *Founders Journal* 4 (Spring 1991).

Christ the Mediator: Pastoral Reflections from The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith

Phil A. Newton

Introduction

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma” (Ephesians 5:1-2). Paul calls on Christians to have “distinctive walks—as beloved children,” even seeking in our relationships, ethics, morals, and service to “be imitators of God.” Startling as this may appear, the Apostle doesn’t just toss out a mysterious command for Christians. He gives clear markers for how to be imitators of God. “Walk in love,” he tells us. But love has been distorted in our day to mean virtually anything a person wants it to mean. Thankfully, Paul qualifies his meaning by pointing to the mediatorial work of Jesus Christ. So, he means that the Christian is to walk in the particular kind of love displayed by Jesus Christ. “And walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.” At least that points us in the right direction—to Jesus Christ. Yet, admittedly, rather than Scripture, many people’s traditions, superstitions, and experiences serve to inform the mind of what it means to walk in love just as Christ did. So, some consider Christ’s love to be devoid of law or justice or even discretion. Others paint Christ as just one of the boys, “the Man Upstairs,” who goes along with whatever suits one’s mood.

Obviously, Paul had a clear portrait of Jesus Christ in view when he called for Christians to find their motivation and model for walking in love *in Him*. But how do we know that the Christ we envision is not an imposter masquerading in our thoughts? “Well, that’s easy,” one might say. “Just give him a Bible and let him read for himself!” I agree, but where do you tell such an inquiring person to read? Certainly, you advise reading the Gospels, and while you’re at it, you also recommend reading the Epistles. For that matter, as grand as is the Christ-portrait painted in the Gospels and Epistles, you also recognize that much help can be found in the sermons of the Acts and John’s Apocalypse, so you commend these as well. But, the more you ponder your recommendation, you think about Isaiah’s prophecies of Christ and the incomparable “Suffering Servant” of chapter 53, along with the countless messianic passages in the other Prophets. And can you forget the majestic way that the Psalms portray Christ? Or how about the important prophetic material about Christ in the Pentateuch and Historical books?

The fact is, no one passage, chapter, or book of the Bible tells us all that we need to know concerning Jesus Christ. Each portion of God's Word—Old and New Testaments—revealing Jesus Christ, contributes to a fuller understanding of the One called Son of God, Son of Man, the Word, Savior, Messiah, Good Shepherd, Prophet, Priest, King, and Lord. So, how can we capture the essence of the Scriptures' teaching regarding Jesus Christ? There is no better place to turn than enduring confessional statements. Among Baptists, none has weathered the changing religious landscape better than The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, often called, quite simply, the 1689. So how does the 1689 help us understand the Christ that motivates and models Christian love? Chapter 8, "Of Christ the mediator," narrowed down to paragraphs 5, 7, and 8, will suffice for present considerations.

What did Jesus Christ offer to God?

How is the Christian to walk in love? "Just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma." Christ's love is personalized, "for you," referring to the Ephesian believers, and also broadened to include all of the elect, "for us." Paragraph 5 in the 1689 packs together the biblical teaching of what Jesus offered to God "for us."

The Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself, which he through the eternal Spirit once offered up unto God, hath fully satisfied the justice of God, procured reconciliation, and purchased an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven for all those whom the Father hath given unto him.

Christ's active and passive obedience

As God, the Lord Jesus gave the law; as Man—the Incarnate One, He kept the law, giving "perfect obedience" to the law, fulfilling the covenant of works. While "through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19). The law gave life to no one due to the inherent sinfulness in the human race. "For what the law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did." On behalf of lawbreakers, God sent "His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh," as the one who perfectly fulfilled the law (Romans 8:3). He purposed and succeeded in fulfilling all righteousness in His obedience to the law (Matthew 3:15). Therefore, He qualified to be "an offering for sin," condemning "sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:3–4). The substitutionary nature of Christ's death, "an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma," was foreshadowed by the high priest presenting the blood of a goat on the mercy seat and by the multiplied sin offerings in the old economy. Yet, "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). So, God sent His Son to do His will, so that "by this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10).

Once and only once

God accepted the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf “which he through the eternal Spirit once offered up unto God” or, as Hebrews 9:14 declares, “How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God,” so, One perfectly obedient, “cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” Rather than the endless sacrifice of bulls and goats that have no efficacy to remove sin, “Christ gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God.” The merit of His death is obvious by the Holy Spirit offering the atoning blood to God. Unlike the practice in the Roman mass, God accepted once and for all the sacrifice of Christ to atone for our sins, so that no other offering or merit can contribute to the sufficiency of His work, nor is anything else needed to secure the salvation of the elect. Christ did the will of God in both His active obedience to the law and His substitutionary death. “By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Hebrews 10:10). Atonement was made through the bloody death of Christ. So efficacious and sufficient was His death that the sanctification of the elect is guaranteed. “For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Hebrews 10:14).

Three-fold certainty

The confession mentions three specific accomplishments of Christ’s active and passive righteousness. First, He “hath fully satisfied the justice of God,” that is, Christ propitiated God with reference to His eternal justice. So that heaven, earth, and hell might know the effectiveness of Christ’s work to satisfy God’s justice and assuage His just wrath, “God displayed [Christ on the cross] publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.” Lest anyone dare to accuse the gracious forgiving God of overlooking the guilt of sin and trampling upon His own divine law, His own Son died the public, shameful death of the cross. “This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just [in forgiving sinners] and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:25–26). God’s justice demanded satisfaction from the condemned race. “Therefore, He [Christ] had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Hebrews 2:17).

Second, Jesus Christ also “procured reconciliation.” As Paul stated so emphatically in Colossians, “And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach” (1:21–22). Friends need no reconciliation. “Alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds,” pictures the human dilemma before the infinitely holy God, who likewise holds such rebels accountable before Him (Romans 3:19). But, out of His kindness, He has pursued reconciliation, procuring it through sending His eternal Son to become one of the condemned race, so that “in His fleshly body through death” He might effect reconciliation. Again

Paul joins the theme: “God... reconciled us to Himself through Christ... God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19). Reconciliation required the Mediator to be God and man: to give infinite value to His death as God and to satisfy God through death on behalf of men as Man.

Third, Christ’s reconciling propitiatory work procures eternal benefits. He has “purchased an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven for all those whom the Father hath given unto Him.” This eternal inheritance He provides specifically for the elect. The writer of Hebrews states plainly, “For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance” (Hebrews 9:15). “Those who have been called” identify a particular people, the elect of God, who have benefited from the death of Christ in a particular way, as those receiving “the promise of the eternal inheritance.” Who are these elect of God that has received the eternal inheritance? The heavenly song identifies them and their Redeemer. “Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth” (Revelation 5:9–10). Christ’s death on the cross was not to provide a potential salvation, but by His death to purchase particular people, “men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.” Consequently, through the application of His redemptive work, He “made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God,” with a future unending, as those that “will reign upon the earth.”

How did Jesus accomplish this redemptive work?

Again, we are considering how to walk in love “just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us.” If our view of Christ lacks biblical authenticity, then so will our walk modeled after Him. Paul taught us to look to Christ, to see the depth and reach of His love, and to recognize the extent of His atoning death. The 7th paragraph of the 1689 helps us to grapple with this question.

Christ, in the work of mediation, acteth according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself; yet by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture attributed to the person denominated by the other nature.

The work of mediation accomplished by Christ

A mediator faces a difficult task. He represents two estranged parties, understanding the nature of both, recognizing the cause of estrangement, and determining the measures necessary to effect reconciliation. Christ is not only called “Mediator,” but he also accomplished “the work of mediation.” “For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time” (1

Timothy 2:5-6). No one else in the human race had anything to offer God to effect reconciliation, nor did any even desire reconciliation. But Christ bore this responsibility alone as the one mediator between God and men.

Mediation required deity and humanity

For men to be reconciled to God, the mediator must act “according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself.” Christ’s deity gave infinite value and merit to His atoning death as mediator. Christ’s humanity satisfied the divine justice requiring man to die for his own sin (Genesis 3:17; Romans 6:23). Paul captured this as he exhorted the Ephesian elders “to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” God’s church was purchased by God; yet God, who is spirit (John 4:24) and immortal and invisible (1 Timothy 1:17) cannot die. Men have offended God’s law and spurned His divine authority as rebels, and so justly deserve to bear the weight of his eternal wrath. Yet none bearing His wrath can satisfy eternal justice and be reconciled to God at the same time. So, Christ “had to be made like His brethren in all things... to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Hebrews 2:17). The eternal Son alone qualified to mediate between God and men. “No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven; the Son of Man” (John 3:13). The one person, Jesus Christ, died in His human nature at the cross, shedding His blood in death on the cross, to ransom the elect race by vicariously bearing in His own body the full measure of divine justice. His deity gave value to His sacrifice while His humanity fully satisfied God’s requirements for justice.

Two natures in one person

Though Christ died in the flesh we do not hesitate to affirm with Paul that God “purchased [His church] with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). The 1689 expresses so well the difficulty we often face when trying to distinguish the two natures of the one person of Jesus Christ. “Yet by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture attributed to the person denominated by the other nature.” John L. Dagg, obviously influenced by this confession, confirms this idea in saying, “attributes or works which belong to one nature, are ascribed to his person, denoted by the name which is derived from the other nature.”¹ And so, even such a bold statement as, “God died for me,” in the spirit of Acts 20:28, does not run contrary to biblical revelation in the unity of Christ, since, as Chalcedon affirmed, “the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person.”² Again Dagg makes this very point in illustrating the biblical phenomenon of ascribing what is peculiar to one nature to a title that denominates the other: “He is called God, and the Lord of Glory, when his blood and crucifixion, things pertaining to his human flesh, are the subjects of discourse. ‘They would not have crucified the Lord of Glory.’”³ Though this transfer of language indicates without doubt the singularity of the person, this must not lead us to the false conclusion that the natures lose their proper distinctions, or as the confession states, “each nature doing that which is proper to itself.” Dagg again reminds us of this point in saying, “The union of the natures

does not confound the properties peculiar to each. The humanity is not deified, nor the divinity humanized.”⁴ The confession reminds us of this transcendentally mysterious, but necessary, truth, that the single person Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God, embodies all the relations, experiences, attributes, and salvific transactions of both the divine and human natures. Only thus is He the author of eternal salvation to all who trust in Him.

For whom did Christ atone?

Since Jesus Christ, who “gave Himself up for us,” did not come to save sinners only potentially but actually to “purchase for God with [His] blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation,” the 1689, paragraph 8, affirms this, followed by the certainty of the generous gifts contained in His redemption (Ephesians 5:2; Revelation 5:9).

To all those for whom Christ hath obtained eternal redemption, he doth certainly and effectually apply and communicate the same, making intercession for them; uniting them to himself by his Spirit; revealing unto them, in and by his Word, the mystery of salvation, persuading them to believe and obey, governing their hearts by his Word and Spirit, and overcoming all their enemies by his almighty power and wisdom, in such manner and ways as are most consonant to his wonderful and unsearchable dispensation; and all of free and absolute grace, without any condition foreseen in them to procure it.

Particular people

Jesus Christ declared the certainty that the Father had given to Him a particular people, who would definitely come to Him and whom He would never cast out (John 6:37). Jesus came specifically to atone for the sins of a people from all ages and ethno-linguistic groups whom the Father had given Him thereby redeeming them. Jesus shows His own commitment to this plan by explaining, “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day” (John 6:39). For this reason, the Lord declared, “I lay down My life for the sheep,” an act accomplished by Christ when He “gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God” (John 10:15; Ephesians 5:2). And so Jesus Christ could pray, not for the world in general, but for all of those for whom He died: “I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours” (John 17:9). The 1689 affirms the certainty that those whom Christ has secured by His redemptive work, He will “certainly and effectually apply and communicate” the generous bounty won through His death and resurrection.

Generous gifts

As believers face the daunting command, “walk in love, just as Christ loved you and gave Himself up for us,” the assurance is given that all the Christian

needs to exercise such a walk is found in Jesus Christ and His redemptive work (Ephesians 5:2). The confession articulates seven specific blessings connected with Christ's determination to redeem, justify, sanctify, and glorify the elect of God. First, Christ intercedes for us: "Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us" (Romans 8:34). Second, Christ unites us to Himself by the Spirit, who seals us and remains the earnest of our inheritance (Ephesians 1:13-14). Third, Christ reveals to us the mystery of salvation through the Word: "all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you"; "I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world"; "In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will" (John 15:15; 17:6; Ephesians 1:8b-9a). Fourth, Christ persuades us to believe and obey: "And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 5:20). Fifth, Christ governs us by His Word and Spirit: "For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God"; "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth" (Romans 8:14; John 17:17). Sixth, Christ overcomes all of our enemies by His omnipotence and wisdom: "For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death" (1 Corinthians 15:25-26). Seventh, Christ lavishes the riches of His grace upon His people, as the 1689 expresses, "in such manner and ways as are most consonant to his wonderful and unsearchable dispensation" (Ephesians 1:9-11). All that He does for us, He does "all of free and absolute grace, without any condition foreseen in them to procure it."

Conclusion

Our model for walking in love, as well as our motivation, is found in the redemptive, sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. Unless we take the time to study and ponder the depth of such love, we impoverish our ability to "be imitators of God, as beloved children." The Baptist Confession of 1689 serves us well, in concisely picturing Jesus Christ and His work, as well as providing ample citations from the Word of God for our meditation. The confession aids our looking to Christ. ☞

Notes:

¹John L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology* (Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Press, 1982), 201.

²Philip Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom*, vol. 2, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993 from 1931 edition), 62.

³Dagg, 202.

⁴Ibid.

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